

COBALT-SERIES

今野緒雪

マリア様がみてる

プレミアムオブマインド

集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 28

Written by:

Oyuki Konno

Illustrated by:

Reine Hibiki

Translated by:

Baka-Tsuki

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

School had finished and Yumi was returning to her classroom having taken out the rubbish. As she was walking past the lockers on the first-floor a voice called out to her from behind, saying, “Umm, Rosa Chinensis en bouton.” She turned around and three students were standing there, huddled together as though for warmth.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re in the middle of something.”

Yumi didn’t recognize the girls, but they were probably first years. They had that characteristic nervous air about them that younger students had when addressing seniors that they weren’t all that close to. They’d all clammed up, obviously hoping that someone else would take the initiative in this conversation. Ah, a clam bake, huh?

“It’s okay, I was just heading back to my classroom.”

Yumi smiled, setting down the rubbish bin. So, what’s this about?

Two of the girls prodded the other one forward, saying, “Go on.” The singled-out girl nervously held something out towards Yumi.

“Huh?”

Seeing what she was holding out, Yumi tilted her head in bewilderment.

This took place a few days after the Valentine’s Day project.

A minor event that occurred a short while before the half-day dates.

Frame of Mind 1

“Ah, there she is. Lucky!”

Upon returning to the now clean classroom, Yumi found the photography club’s Takeshima Tsutako-san amongst the few classmates of hers that remained. Usually Tsutako-san would head straight to the photography club’s clubroom once school had finished.

To find her settled at her desk working on something was unusual, and Yumi commented on it as she walked past Tsutako-san’s desk on her journey back from putting the rubbish bin in its usual spot in the corner of the room.

“What are you up to?”

There were numerous photographs spread across Tsutako-san’s desk. There were also a number of paperback-sized envelopes stacked beside her, undoubtedly containing many more photographs. It was hard to tell if she’d been forced into this compromise due to the lack of space on her desk or if she was just going through the envelopes one at a time.

“I’m kinda doing some club work by myself.”

Tsutako-san replied, without interrupting her work. Omitting any bothersome explanation.

“Oh? So why not do that in the club room?”

Yumi asked again. She was thinking that, obviously, the photography club’s main activity was taking photos, and the individual members could do that wherever they wanted to, but the best place to perform this kind of clerical work was surely the clubroom, right?

“The third years are using it, so I was banned from going there.”

Tsutako-san was distributing the photographs as though she were dealing a pack of cards. It was hard to tell what rules she was using from a brief inspection, but Tsutako-san was probably using some set of guidelines that were perfectly clear to her. From time to time she'd stop and move one or two photos into a different pile.

“Why were you banned?”

To minimize the interruption, Yumi waited until Tsutako-san had distributed all the photos she was holding on to her desk before asking the question. In response, Tsutako-san flicked her hair back as though drained of all energy.

“Ahh – in the end I guess I have to explain it anyway.”

“... Sorry.”

Still, Yumi was intensely curious.

“It's okay. I shouldn't have skipped it to begin with.”

Tsutako-san looked up at Yumi and smiled. Her story went, basically, something like this:

With the graduation ceremony almost upon them, the third-years had challenged Tsutako-san to a photography showdown. They weren't looking to kick her out of the club, instead they wanted to show this prodigious second-year what her seniors were capable of. By and large, the third-year photography club members already knew what they were going to do next year, so they were getting all fired up about banding together and “Knocking out Takeshima Tsutako.”

“They said we shouldn't show our cards until the actual event. And they've thrown in all kinds of restrictions. It's such a pain.”

“I see.”

So the third-years had seized control of the clubroom and Tsutako-san was forced to use her classroom.

“Have they shut out all the first and second-years?”

“They’re not being as strict on them as they are on me, so they’re allowed in to get anything they may have left inside the clubroom. In contrast to that, they’ve been very friendly to our newest club member, Shouko-chan, beckoning her to join them. Then they started making jokes, saying, ‘Look, she doesn’t know the technical details so she has to spy on us.’”

“Oh.”

The third-years toying with the first-years. It seemed the same thing happened everywhere.

“So when’s this showdown happening?”

“At the third-year’s farewell ceremony.”

“Huh? ... Ahh, that’s right.”

Yumi had been momentarily confused, but when she remembered she struck her left palm with her balled-up right hand.

‘The Third Year’s Send-off.’ Like the name suggested, it was a farewell celebration that was held prior to the graduation ceremony. The clubs and various other groups were putting on displays and performances with the aim of entertaining their graduating seniors (which was why Yumi was a bit taken aback when she heard that it was going to be the location for the photography club’s showdown).

Well, that’s how it was last year. This year, due to overwhelming demand, they had decided to showcase the work of the graduating seniors. It’s possible that this showdown was the brainchild of the third-year students from the newspaper club.

“Surely you’d have plenty of good photos, Tsutako-san.”

Yumi patted Tsutako-san on the shoulder, as though to say, “Don’t worry, it’ll be a piece of cake.” However, Tsutako-san herself looked depressed.

“But one of the rules is that the photos have to be unpublished.”

“I see.”

Tsutako-san would have displayed her best photos during the school festival. Since she had to use unpublished photos, that left just those taken after the school festival. Either that or she had to choose something that, for one reason or another, she hadn't displayed at the school festival.

“It's hard enough to find a good photograph, let alone one that's unpublished. Despite that, it still leaves about five months of photos to sift through. The rest are hidden somewhere. Or maybe I should go out, concentrate, and take some new photos.

Tsutako-san grumbled, talking mainly to herself. It looks like the self-proclaimed ace of the photography club was determined to win the showdown. This was quite different to Yumi's way of thinking – Yumi considered it only natural that she should lose to her seniors.

“And that's why I'm doing photography club work by myself in the classroom.”

Tsutako-san thumped the desk in frustration, and the vibration caused the pile of envelopes to spill to the floor.

“Ahh – ”

Tsutako-san hastily jumped out of her chair, reaching for the envelopes. Yumi squatted beside her, helping to pick up the fallen envelopes. As she was handing them back to Tsutako-san, a thought popped into Yumi's head.

“Hey, Tsutako-san. Why don't you come to the Rose Mansion? The table we have on the second floor is much bigger than your desk. And there's no meeting today, so you're welcome to use it.”

“Huh?”

Tsutako-san was initially a bit surprised and politely refused, saying “Oh, I couldn't impose.” But she seemed to be swayed when Yumi said, “If you

stay here, there's bound to be someone else interrupting like I did." Eventually Tsutako-san agreed to go along and started packing up her belongings. She squeezed the envelopes into a paper bag, which she carried along with her school satchel and her coat. Having made the invitation, Yumi prepared to leave too and they exited the classroom together.

"Still, that was news to me. That there are third-years in the photography club."

As they walked down the corridor, Yumi said the first thing that came to her mind. Tsutako-san laughed incredulously.

"Did you think it was just me and Shouko-chan? It wouldn't be officially recognized as a club if there were only two members. We do have days set aside for club activities, but there's no meetings and everyone's free to come and go as they please, and to take photos wherever they want. Since it's a high-school club there's some pretty nice equipment in the clubroom, so the club has a fairly decent number of members. Although there's a lot who don't turn up for the club activities."

"Ohh."

Yumi thought back to the school festival and remembered that the photography club's display did indeed feature works by photographers other than Tsutako-san. But she had no idea what the name of any of the other exhibitors were, so they hadn't really etched themselves into Yumi's memory. Or perhaps she had only paid attention to the works of her friend, Tsutako-san.

"So, for this showdown, how will the winner be decided?"

Would they have a ballot box, and the person with the most votes wins? That was the sort of thing Yumi was imagining, but it seems she was somewhat wide of the mark.

"Well, it's a bit complicated. It's not about accepting someone else's decision, in the end it's about what we think best. Well, rather than 'we'

perhaps I should have said ‘each of us, individually.’ Each of us will come to our own conclusion, and that’s good enough.”

“Sorry, I don’t really follow you.”

Yumi said earnestly, to which Tsutako-san raised a finger and said, “It’s like this.”

“With art, there’s no ranks or levels, right? So there’s no final authority that says whether something is good or bad. Well, that’s setting aside competitions, which do need a judge. But that’s not necessary within our club. It’s better if we each look at the various works and form our own opinion.”

So while it was being labeled a showdown, it was more about proving to themselves that they were better. Apparently they were supposed to maintain a poker face, so they would know their decision, but no-one else would. The contest would be decided within each of them.

Was that it? The true battle was setting up the camera, pressing the shutter and then developing the photographs that sparkled brilliantly, which Tsutako-san had done time after time.

“Wh-at, is that trying a bit too hard?”

Tsutako-san started to jog ahead, looking a bit embarrassed. Yumi chased after her, then overtook her and spun around.

“No, it’s really pretty cool. I was just a bit overawed.”

Whereupon Tsutako-san raised the tiny camera she had produced from somewhere and said, “Thanks,” as she took a photo of Yumi’s face.

Even as she made a strange face due to the surprise attack and the dazzling flash, Yumi knew. That despite all this, Tsutako-san had taken a surprisingly good photo. This was based upon a great deal of prior experience.

“You’re welcome.”

Opening the front door of the Rose Mansion, the quiet atmosphere inside the room settled around them. It looked like no-one had been here for a couple of hours. The air had an undisturbed feel to it. That was to be expected, since they had confirmed at lunch that they wouldn't be having a meeting today.

They climbed the creaking staircase. They did have rooms on the first floor, but they had been partially converted into storerooms.

As expected, there was nobody on the second floor.

"I'm going to make some tea."

Yumi started by filling the kettle with tap water.

"Don't put yourself out on my account."

Tsutako-san dropped her satchel and coat on a chair, then immediately started removing the envelopes from the paper bag.

"Today I'm a boarder, not a guest."

"Okay. But I wanted to have some tea anyway, so I'll make enough for two."

Yumi checked that it was okay with Tsutako-san, then opened all the windows. She then prepared the cups and the teapot before closing the windows again. It was still cold outside, so once they had fresh air in the room the windows were better off closed.

As she poured the tea into the two teacups, Yumi was struck by a strange sensation. Until now, tea for two had been prepared on countless occasions.

For her onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, and herself.

For Yoshino-san and herself.

For Shimako-san and herself.

Add to that for two other people, when she wasn't there.

There were many different combinations that had existed.

But this was the first time that Yumi had prepared tea for Tsutako-san and herself.

Even though they'd been in the same class for two years now. Even though they chatted to each other quite frequently in the classroom. Perhaps they had changed the usual atmosphere by merely changing location to the Rose Mansion.

Yumi carried the teacups over to the table, upon which Tsutako-san had arranged her photographs as though she were playing concentration.

"I'll leave this here."

Yumi placed the teacup away from the photographs, so as not to interfere. Since Tsutako-san didn't seem to be hiding the photographs, Yumi took the opportunity to have a look at them.

"Ooooh."

Yumi instinctively cried out. Each of the photographs contained a pair of girls wearing Lillian's high school uniform. The envelope that the photos seemed to come from had "Soeurs – Other" written on it.

"It's okay, go ahead."

Tsutako-san said as she too looked over the photographs.

There were soeurs smiling at the camera, soeurs gazing at each other oblivious to the camera, the surprised faces of soeurs who had been ambushed, and photos of soeurs walking together holding hands.

In each of the photos there seemed to be some kind of intense personal drama taking place between the two girls featured.

April Deja-vu

“Suzumoto Ichigo? It’s Suzumoto-san, right?”

– I think that’s how it all started.

It was just prior to the Lillian’s Girls Academy’s high-school entrance ceremony.

This was the first thing that the “Suzuki Futaba-san” seated in front of me said, as she turned around and read the nameplate attached to my desk. Then she said, “One more stroke than me.”¹

Suzumoto is written as 鈴本, Suzuki is written as 鈴木. Suzumoto has one additional horizontal stroke in the second character.

Deja-vu.

My head spun. I knew this scene.

Well, there had been people with the surname Suzuki positioned in front of me at various times during primary and middle-school, but that alone wasn’t the cause of the deja-vu.

Her face, in which the pimples were probably the most attractive feature, her short and stocky build, her shoulder-length hair which was just a bit too short for the pony-tail it was in – I remembered each of these little details and more.

There was no doubting that I had witnessed this scene before.

So I wasn’t the least bit surprised when she followed up, “One more stroke than me,” with the words I knew she’d say.

“And because of that you’re one number higher than me in the class list.”

See.

It seemed only natural to know this, like watching a repeat on TV.



Since that day, I'd occasionally experienced this deja-vu based precognition and it never really startled me. Either because of the way I'd been tempered by events of the past year, or because I'd simply become numb to the sensation of surprise.

A year ago I was involved in a car accident, suffered a head injury, and slept for ten months. Then, on a warm February morning, with no prior indication, I opened my eyes. The next two months consisted solely of having various scans taken and doing rehabilitation work. A whole year had passed by the time I was ready to resume normal school-life. As a result of my prolonged absence, the number of days I had attended and credits I had received were nowhere near enough to pass so, now, I've restarted high-school after a year's delay. Consequently, minor things like that don't really disturb me any more.

Anyway.

Although I look like I've completely recovered, I have no memories from the day of the accident, from the time I woke up until the accident itself. Well, according to the doctors I probably still have those memories somewhere, I'm just unable to find where they're stored.

At any rate, I interpreted my strange ability as a consolation gift, given to me by God who took pity on me for losing a part of my memory. Either that, or a part of my memory had to be erased to make way for this new ability. – Well, at the very least I felt that these were two sides of the same coin.

While on that subject, the deja-vu I occasionally encountered was neither beneficial nor detrimental – it could probably best be described as harmless.

It was only minor things like knowing the pun the teacher was about to make several seconds before she said it, or that one of the teachers would hold quizzes from the first lesson onwards. The sort of thing that a new high-school student might hear from their onee-sama or an older student in one of their clubs, rather than experience as déjà-vu. And even when I could predict that there was going to be a test, it was pretty much useless because I wouldn't know what questions would be on it. Additionally, I'd usually only realize right before it was about to happen, so it didn't give me any more time to prepare either.

“Ichigo-san.”

I turned around and Futaba-san was standing there, smiling.

“The blackboard almost looks like a mirror, it's so sparkling clean, see.”

She took the cloth from my hand and used it to skilfully wipe clean the inside of a bucket. I looked around and saw the desks, which had been stacked to one side, had been returned to their usual positions and the windows, all of which had been opened, were all now closed. It looks like the classroom cleanup had been completed while I was spacing out.

“Hehehe. Ichigo-san, your consciousness flies away somewhere else from time to time, doesn't it? Right? It's weird, but no-one says that. Even though there's this hard-to-approach vibe about you. Everyone says that you're conversing with God, since you look so beautiful and serene.”

Futaba-san finished cleaning the bucket while she was saying this, then held my bag out towards me and said, “Let's go home together.”

“It must be nice to be you, Ichigo-san. You've got slender arms and legs and you're taller than average. And your short hair matches nicely with your sharp facial features.”

Futaba-san joked as we walked along the ginkgo tree-lined path, standing up on her tiptoes.

“I wonder. After all, little Futaba-san is quite cute, no?”

I smiled. Because that was how I felt, from the bottom of my heart.

There was nothing about me that should be envied. My limbs were slender because they had been reduced to just muscle and bone while I was comatose, and my hair was short because my head had been shaved following the accident to make it easier for the doctors to operate on me. And I thought the reason I was taller than Futaba-san was probably because I was actually a year older than her.

The truth was, I liked Futaba-san. Her cheerfulness, her vibrant personality, her face, everything about her fit me to a tee.

“Hehehe. I might be this small and cute now, but you’d better believe that I’m going to shoot up anytime now. That’s how it is in my family. Even my mother was like that.”

“Really?”

But the thing I liked most was when she called out my name.

“Ichigo-san, Ichigo-san.”

That gentle, enveloping voice seemed to overlap with another I could only vaguely remember.

Could this too be deja-vu? A voice that had appeared countless times during my dreams.

The voice that whispered, “Ichigo-san, Ichigo-san,” sounded like Futaba-san’s, only more ephemeral and heartrending. It sounded so sorrowful that I always thought I should reply, but I could never open my mouth. Nor did I know what that person’s face looked like.

I wasn’t certain of just when exactly I had had this particular dream. Whether it was during my ten month coma, or some time after I had regained consciousness. Either way, it was definitely some time after the accident.

The dreams all seemed so similar that I started to wonder if they were, in actual fact, reality. My working theory was that someone came and talked to me while I lay comatose.

However, none of my friends from middle-school had a voice that sounded like that. I entertained the possibility that it had been Futaba-san, but quickly discarded it. I went to a different middle-school and passed the entrance exam to join Lillian's high-school, whereas Futaba-san graduated from Lillian's middle-school, so there was no possible intersection in our lives prior to the start of high-school. And since I was repeating first-year, I'd be a year older than Futaba-san.

"Hey, did any of my friends come and visit while I was in hospital?"

I asked my mother when I returned home.

"... Friends? You mean Miko-chan and Hiro-chan?"

The names listed were my two closest friends from middle-school.

"Not them."

"I don't know any other friends of yours."

"I suppose so – ?"

The accident happened on the day of the entrance ceremony last year, as I was making my way home from school.

"I guess I wouldn't have had any time to make friends at Lillian's high-school, right?"

I looked to my mother for confirmation.

"Th, that's right."

For some reason, she looked away before continuing.

“But I don’t really know.”

The way she said that sounded somehow wrong. As though she may have been hiding something. She’d been wiping the same spot on the table for some time now.

“Why are you asking about this, Ichigo?”

“Oh, no reason.”

Getting information out of someone who was trying to hide it would probably be difficult. I decided to stop in at the hospital on the way home from school tomorrow, and ask one of the nurses from the ward I’d stayed in about it.

“Oh ... ? There was?”

It was much easier getting information out of someone who wasn’t trying to keep a secret.

“Yeah, there was. She wore the same kind of uniform that you’ve got on now. She came to visit you every day, more or less.”

The friendly nurse said, full of confidence.

“Every day ... ?”

“Yep. She was a nice, cheerful kid. She didn’t know if you could hear her or not, but she’d talk to you about school. Things that happened in class, the teachers lame puns, things like that.”

“– Ohh”

“Come to think of it, she stopped coming just before the summer holidays. I wonder why that was.”

My poor friend, obliterated from my memory. I nervously asked:

“... This girl, what did she look like?”

“Let’s see. She was short, a bit chubby, and had pimples all over her face.”

No matter how I looked at it, those features belonged to Futaba-san.

* *

What did this mean? Was it a coincidental resemblance? Or was that just the type of person I liked. It was too painful to think that, like me, Futaba-san was repeating first year, parting ways with her many friends from middle-school.

At the very least, there were now no doubts as to whether or not that person really existed. She wore a Lillian’s school uniform and told stories about her daily life while I slept.

Most of the deja-vu I felt could then be put down to me reliving the experiences that she had told me about, rather than remaining as some kind of mystery.

So then, who on earth was that girl? And would someone I’d only met at last year’s entrance ceremony really come and visit me in hospital every day?

I didn’t know.

Because at the time I’d slept on, oblivious to it all.

Making no progress, I questioned my mother. Surprised by this, she confessed.

“It seemed like you did make a friend at the entrance ceremony. She’d often come to the hospital. But then I said to her, “Don’t come here any more.” I didn’t see her again after that. I’m sorry, Ichigo. I wasn’t thinking straight back then.”

According to my mother, we'd hit it off at the entrance ceremony and left school together. She'd been there at the scene of the accident and ridden with me in the ambulance to the hospital. Then she'd visited me every day. At first my mother had been grateful, but it soon became too painful for her to see that healthy young girl. Watching that girl rapidly mature while her own daughter lay comatose was just too much for her to bear.

"It's okay, I understand."

I wasn't looking to condemn my mother. It must have been a painful, heart-breaking struggle for the people around me during the ten months that I spent asleep.

"Really?"

Despite being classmates only for a day, there was someone that I had become good friends with. For some reason I felt this warm, flushed sensation.

* * *

Then one day I happened to see Futaba-san talking to an older-looking student in the hallway.

But that wasn't all. The scene made my heart hammer wildly, even though I thought I was no longer capable of being perturbed.

In the presence of this affectionate and friendly pair I could neither move forwards nor escape backwards, so stood frozen to the spot.

Noticing my gaze, the older student said, "See you," to Futaba-san then bowed quickly to me and left. She was a pretty girl – tall and slender, with long hair.

"That person just now, is she your onee-sama?"

My voice trembled as I asked Futaba-san this question. Deep within my heart I wanted her to deny it.

Lillian's Girls Academy high school has this unusual tradition, called the soeur system, wherein an older student will take a younger student as her petit soeur and guide her through school life. The one-on-one nature of this system builds an intimate relationship between the two soeurs.

"You got it. As usual, Ichigo-san."

Because of my regular deja-vu, Futaba-san considered me someone with keen instincts and so readily admitted their relationship.

"She's very pretty."

"Really? You think so? I think she is too."

Futaba-san smiled triumphantly. She seemed to be quite proud of her onee-sama.

I didn't ask any of the normal follow-up questions, like "What's her name?" or "How did you meet?" I felt that if I said anything then it would just alert Futaba-san to the disturbance in my heart.

(Disturbance ... ?)

I swiftly reviewed what had happened.

What was I disturbed by? Was I worried that Futaba-san would become more distant, now that she had found an onee-sama?

(Is an onee-sama really necessary? Even though we're the same age, couldn't we be that close?)

A voice cried out within my heart. But it wasn't my current voice.

Deja-vu? – No, something different.

At some time in the past, I had definitely said those words to somebody.

But who? I didn't know.

Perhaps to the person in my dreams, whose voice fleetingly called out,
“Ichigo-san.”

* * * *

A few days later, I accidentally ran into “Futaba-san’s onee-sama” on the way home from school.

“Oh?”

She was standing in front of the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the road, and had just finished praying. She smiled, looking a bit nervous, when she turned around and saw me there.

“You’re Futaba’s classmate – ”

“That’s right. Gokigenyou.”

I somehow managed to give her the proper greeting. If she had just spent another ten seconds praying, I may have been able to run away.

“And Futaba? She’s not with you?”

“No. She’s trying out for a club today.”

“Ahh, right, I remember her saying something about that. I think she only joined the basketball club because she wants to grow taller.”

She put her hand to her mouth, stifling a giggle. My first impression of her was that she was quiet and neat, but perhaps she was a bit more lively than I had imagined.

“And you? You’re not going to tryout for the basketball club too?”

“I’m not. I’m still recovering, so for the time being I’m not joining any clubs.”

Futaba-san’s onee-sama’s response was merely to nod her head and say, “I see.” She didn’t ask what illness I had, or how long I had been sick.

“Well, since neither of us are in any clubs, we should try to get along on the way home.”

Futaba-san’s onee-sama said, then held my hand and started to walk off. I felt deeply guilty for what I was doing to Futaba-san, but I didn’t let go of her hand.

At that moment I was enveloped in a flash of dazzling light.

Click. The sound of a shutter reached my ears at about the same time.

“Pardon me. It was a beautiful scene.”

Standing there was Takeshima Tsutako-san, from the photography club. No, that’s not right, I should refer to her as Tsutako-sama since she’s now my senior by one year.

“Are you two soeurs?”

“My, that would be nice. But unfortunately it’s incorrect.”

Futaba-san’s onee-sama giggled once more. Even though they were in the same year, it looked like they were only passing acquaintances.

“Oh?”

Tsutako-sama mumbled. She had an odd look on her face when she lowered the camera.

“Is this deja-vu?”

“Huh?”

“I feel like I’ve seen this exact same scene before.”

I was shocked.

Because just now I had felt the same way.

Tsutako-sama with her camera out, asking us:

Are you two soeurs?

But, that’s probably what I should expect from my memory.

I couldn’t say when, or to who, it had happened.

(My, that would be nice. But unfortunately it’s incorrect.)

I didn’t know. My mind was in uproar.

The light of the sun setting in the west sparkled off the new leaves.

“Well, you take lots of photographs of students, Tsutako-san. So you’ve probably seen something like this before.”

Futaba-san’s onee-sama said. But that wasn’t an outright negation. So I may still have been remembering this. Surely there must have been someone that Tsutako-sama had asked this question of, immediately after taking their picture.

My eagle-eyes soon found proof of that, both easily and regrettably.

After parting company with Tsutako-sama we made our way to the bus stop in front of the main gates. As we were getting on the bus that would take us to M station, I caught a glimpse inside Futaba-san’s onee-sama’s purse. It was only for a moment, but there was definitely a folded photo of two young women wearing the Lillian’s high school uniform in there.

One of the pair looked like Futaba-san. I couldn’t make out the other one all that well, but the only sensible explanation was that it was the owner of the purse.

There was nothing unusual about Futaba-san and her onee-sama both appearing in a photo together. After all, they were soeurs.

Even so, I was not amused. I wanted to tear that photo in half and wedge myself in between them.

But I still wasn't sure who I was feeling jealous of. Futaba-san? Or Futaba-san's onee-sama?

"You're not a member of any clubs?"

I asked, as we rode the train away from M station.

I couldn't get the photograph out of my head, but I figured it was more constructive to try and find an easier topic of conversation than to endlessly stew on the negatives.

"Yeah."

That's what she'd said earlier and it looked like she was sticking to it. As she grabbed the handrail near the door, Futaba-san's onee-sama smiled and said, "It just wasn't destined to be."

"But, well, didn't you join the basketball club – ?"

Even though the words coming out of my mouth were mine, I lost my composure.

"Huh?"

Futaba-san's onee-sama seemed puzzled too.

"Ah –, umm, since Futaba-san's a member of the basketball club. That must have been what I was thinking."

There were plenty of examples of juniors and seniors in the same club becoming soeurs. So I thought that Futaba-san had joined the basketball club because she was looking for a soeur. And that's how they would have met.

“That’s how I felt when I first entered high-school, but somehow I lost that chance. And that’s how things are now.”

This time around I couldn’t say it, but in my heart I asked, “Because of me?” Because of me, Futaba-san’s onee-sama hadn’t joined the basketball club. I didn’t fully understand what it meant, but if I could only believe it then perhaps I could remember it.

(But.)

Why would it be because of me?

I passed through the ticket gate and out of the station. Naturally, Futaba-san’s onee-sama remained by my side.

Right.

I knew she got off at the same station that I did. No, wait, that was Futaba-san. Once again, my mind was throw into chaos.

At some point I had walked along this road with her. But that can’t be right. It must have been with Futaba-san.

I felt dizzy. I crouched down alongside the bus terminal.

“What’s the matter?”

Even though she was probably standing right beside me, Futaba-san’s onee-sama’s voice seemed to come from a long way away.

“My head hurts.”

“Should I call an ambulance?”

An ambulance.

I froze.

The red, flashing lights, the ear-splitting siren. The disturbance amongst the commuters.

This wasn't deja-vu. This was my memory of the past.

I remembered.

I'd been standing there, aimlessly.

There, that was the spot. In front of the bus terminal, right by that crossing. That was where I got into an argument with Kazue-san.

"She said, "Do you think it's wrong to join a club just because you want an onee-sama?""

I mumbled to myself. The words that had been shouted at this location, one year ago.

(Is an onee-sama really necessary? Even though we're the same age, couldn't we be that close?)

Back then, I couldn't stand the thought of Kazue-san being closer to someone else than she was to me. Even though we'd only known each other for a few hours, I adored Kazue-san. I felt like we were destined to meet. I wanted to believe that Kazue-san felt the same way I did.

(Ichigo-san is Ichigo-san. Even if I have an onee-sama, our friendship won't change.)

(That's enough.)

I shook Kazue-san off, and ran away. I don't remember what color the lights were in front of me. I hadn't had time to look around. I just wanted to run until I was somewhere Kazue-san couldn't see me.

(Watch out!)

Somebody shouted out. I looked around, and there was a truck right in front of me. In the next instant I was flung through the air for a couple of metres.

I remained like that for ten months, without opening my eyes.

“Watch out!”

Somebody shouted out. I looked around, and I had stepped out onto the pedestrian crossing. Panic gripped me and I started to run.

The pedestrian crossing light was red. I looked to my right, and a car was right there.

Deja-vu.

I froze and couldn't save myself. All I had to do was take a step backwards, but I wasn't even able to do that.

(It's no use.)

I closed my eyes for a moment and was dragged backwards by an enormous force on my right arm. I opened my eyes in time to see a station wagon drive past. I heard the driver shout out, “Are you trying to get yourself killed?” as we landed on our butts.

We? – that's right, I had been saved by Futaba-san's onee-sama.

“... Thank God. I made it in time, this time around.”

“Kazue-san ... ?”

“Ah, you've remembered. Ichigo-san.”

The other girl laughed, using her arms to raise her upper body off the sidewalk.

“But, you were ... ”

The Kazue-san I remembered was tiny, plump and covered in acne – the spitting image of Futaba-san. But the voice that called out “Ichigo-san” sounded far closer to Kazue-san's than Futaba-san's. The voice that came to me in my dreams.

“Looks like I was able to reach you thanks to how much I’ve grown in the last year.”

Kazue-san playfully stuck her tongue out at me, and I recklessly embraced her.

The happy music of the traffic lights² reached my ears. Even though the lights had turned green, and even after they turned red, I kept embracing Kazue-san.

<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/T%C5%8Dryanse>

(We’ve finally met.)

Those memories were so precious to me that I had buried them deep, deep inside.

I was able to reclaim them now.

* * * * *

“What are you two doing?”





After hearing the music of the traffic lights play for the third time, a voice called out to us from above and we both looked up.

“Lillian’s students, being an obstacle to pedestrians. It’s indecent, troublesome.”

For some strange reason, Futaba-san was standing there.

Kazue-san and I had been embracing, oblivious to the people around us, but we hurriedly let go of each other and stood up. We’d been stuck together tightly as though we were opposite magnetic poles, but now we acted as though we were both the same pole.

“What happened to your tryout for the basketball club?”

Futaba-san replied coldly to this question which tried to sweep things under the rug.

“There were a lot of people wanting to join, so all we did was put our names down on the sign-up sheet.”

It goes without saying, but Futaba-san wasn’t in a good mood. Her onee-sama and her best friend had been embracing each other. It wasn’t the sort of thing you could just ignore.

At any rate, we were just getting in the way where we were, so we went back into the station and sat down beside each other on one of the benches. Kazue-san, Futaba-san, then me.

What should I do? What should I say? I hung my head in shame, but could think of nothing. It was Futaba-san who was the first to speak, turning to Kazue-san.

“Onee-chan, don’t accost my friend.”

“O, onee-chan?”

Add to that her assertive manner of speaking. Is that really how she should be addressing her onee-sama? I had a bad feeling about this, and turned to look at them.

“Why are you so surprised? I thought you knew that she was my onee-chan.”

“Huh?”

I knew? I fervently searched my memory. After my first reunion with Kazue-san, when I didn’t know that she was Kazue-san, I remembered asking Futaba-san:

(That person just now, is she your onee-sama?)

(You got it. As usual, Ichigo-san.)

“Ahh – !”

That’s what she meant.

“You mean, she’s really your older sister!?”

“That’s right.”

Sitting next to each other, the overall impression they gave was completely different. But the individual parts of their faces looked exactly the same. More than that, Futaba-san could have been the twin of the Kazue-san from one year ago, which provided more proof of their relationship than mere words could have.

“Ah ... ”

Now that I thought about it, Kazue-san’s surname was also ‘Suzuki.’ We’d become good friends a year ago because we were seated one row apart. Exactly the same as Futaba-san and I, this year.

“I thought you sounded jealous when you asked about Ichigo-san at home, onee-chan. So that’s how it is.”

“That’s how what is?”

“Well, you want to be her soeur, don’t you?”

“Sœur?”

Instinctively, Kazue-san and I looked at each other.

“It’s preposterous that we’d become soeurs. Because I – ”

I waved both my arms, denying this. Having just become reacquainted with Kazue-san after a whole year, I hadn’t even entertained this outrageous notion.

However.

“Why don’t we become soeurs?”

The voice came softly from the other side of Futaba-san.

“Huh?”

“After all, I’m a second-year and you’re a first-year, so we fulfill all the requirements, right? And I want to have that kind of relationship with you once more.”

Kazue-san took her purse out of her pocket, opened it up and held it out to us as though she were showing her license.

Inside was the two-shot photograph that I had seen earlier. But now I understood. The girl that looked like Futaba-san was Kazue-san, one year earlier, and standing beside her, smiling happily, was me.

“Wah, it’s how you used to look, onee-chan, and Ichigo-san. What’s the meaning of this?”

Not knowing the circumstances, Futaba-san was completely taken aback. But after we explained it to her, she understood.

“Hmm. So if you hadn’t been in an accident, Ichigo-san, then I would have been your petit soeur.”

She declared definitively. Where did this self-confidence of hers come from?

“But, well, I guess I’m okay with it being onee-chan.”

Futaba-san took a deep breath, smiled and said:

“Ichigo-san is Ichigo-san. Even if she has an onee-sama, our friendship won’t change.”

Was this deja-vu?

– I’d definitely heard that line somewhere before.

Frame of Mind 2

“Ah – there she is, she’s really here.”

A new face appeared at the Rose Mansion tea-party for two, which had evolved out of Tsutako-san’s solo club work.

Katsura-san, from the second-year wisteria class, excused herself before entering the room.

“Oh, this is a rare treat.”

The two who had already been present looked at each other. How long had it been since Katsura-san was last in the Rose Mansion? It happened so infrequently that Yumi couldn’t readily recall the last time.

Katsura-san, Tsutako-san and Yumi. They had previously been classmates but had since lost that designation. A trio of former first-year peach group students.

“Did you come to see Tsutako-san?”

Yumi asked, based on Katsura-san’s earlier statement. If she’d only said, “Ah – there she is,” then it wouldn’t have been obvious. The “She’s really here” part made it apparent that Katsura-san had been dubious about coming here. Since finding Yumi in the Rose Mansion was more likely to elicit something along the lines of “Of course she’s here,” that left one other possibility, ie. Tsutako-san was the one who was “really here.”

“Bingo.”

Katsura-san said, walking forwards. When Yumi stood up to prepare some tea, she declined the offer saying, “There’s no need, I’m just about to head home,” then made her way over to stand beside Tsutako-san.

“Actually, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

Katsura-san caught sight of Tsutako-san's cup and picked it up, as though suddenly remembering her thirst.

"Is it related to the tennis club?"

Tsutako-san asked.

"Bingo number two."

Katsura-san put the teacup back in its original position, then flashed the peace-sign. Well, given that she was currently wearing her tennis uniform and not her school uniform, that wasn't a particularly difficult deduction to make. Katsura-san had been a member of the tennis club since the beginning of first-year. The short, white skirt looked cute on her.

"You want Tsutako-san to take some photos for you?"

"Putting it bluntly, yes."

Katsura-san didn't say a third 'bingo.' Fair enough. Nine times out of ten, when a high-school student has something they wanted to ask Tsutako-san it would be for her to take some photos. Yumi didn't have any data to back that up, so the actual statistics remained unknown, but it seemed about right.

"We wanted to give our graduating onee-samas a present to remember us by."

Katsura-san started to expand on the topic. They wanted to produce something like a booklet or a mini-album with photos of all the first and second-year members of the tennis club.

"We thought about getting it printed, but then it'd lose that hand-made feel. So we've decided to stick the photos to cardboard and then write messages around them. Then we'll use some cute ribbons to bind the books."

And they wanted Tsutako-san to take the photos that would go in the book. Katsura-san had been chosen to make the request because she could appeal

to their bond of friendship as former classmates. So that's how it was – normally it'd be the club president's job to ask.

“That should be fine.”

Tsutako-san leaned forwards. Her favorite activity was taking photos of the daily lives of female high-school students and she'd be able to take some wonderful shots of girls playing tennis, so of course she was going to leap at the opportunity. And since she was already thinking about taking some new photographs for the 'Third-years' Send-off' it was closer to a mutually beneficial arrangement than an imposition.

“We don't have a lot of money, so if you can do it at cost price that would be a real help.”

Katsura-san said. In other words, they weren't able to pay Tsutako-san for her labor. Well, Tsutako-san probably wasn't looking to make money out of her fellow classmates anyway.

“Well, of course. On top of that, if you let me display the photographs at the 'Third Year's Send-off,' then I'll cover the cost of film as well. What do you say?”

Tsutako-san immediately commenced the negotiations. Shrewd.

“Oh, that'd be a huge help.”

Katsura-san clapped joyously. Then she suddenly reconsidered and muttered, “Wait, no can do.”

“The 'Third Year's Send-off' is before the graduation ceremony, right? It'd put us in a tough spot if the photos were displayed before we gave the third-years their present.”

They wanted it to be a surprise, so they wanted the existence of those photographs to be kept a secret until the moment they were delivered.

“I see. That's a shame.”

A breakdown in negotiations. Tsutako-san slumped her shoulders, dejected. Nonetheless, there was no need to reject the initial offer.

“So I suppose that means you don’t want me taking photos when there are third-years there either.”

“That’s right.”

Katsura-san told Tsutako-san that the tennis club had received permission to hold a special all-day training session on Sunday, so she’d be welcome to take photos at any time during that day. If she couldn’t make it to that then things would get more difficult, as there were usually a couple of third-years hanging around during their regular practices simply because of how large the tennis club was.

“Okay. Next Sunday it is.”

Tsutako-san replied immediately, writing a note in the calendar section of her school diary.

“I hope it’s sunny.”

“That’s for sure.”

Unlike the kendo club or the basketball club, the tennis club practiced outside on the tennis courts. If it was raining, the photography session would have to be postponed.

“The weekly forecast says it should be fine.”

Yumi informed them. Rain wasn’t forecast for the days either side of Sunday either, so there shouldn’t be any chance of the weather slipping.

“Yumi-san, do you always check the weather a week out?”

“As if. It was just by chance.”

Yumi said, trying to deceive them. In actual fact it was a very special day for Yumi, which was why she was concerned about the weather. That’s

right. It was the day set aside for her half-day date with Touko-chan.

“Oh, – by chance, huh.”

Katsura-san smiled knowingly as she looked at the photographs spread across the table, one after the other. Having found the one she was looking for, she said, “This one.”

“Which one?”

Yumi came over to have a look, but the picture had been taken from such long range that it was hard to make out who was in it.

Two young women were crouching in the school’s courtyard, looking at the ground.

“Lots of people are saying all kinds of bad things about her, and to a certain degree that’s understandable.”

Katsura-san seemed to recognize one of the girls in the photograph. Then, with a faraway look in her eyes, she continued.

“But if she has an onee-sama, that might change her feelings for other people.”

Three-Leaf Clover

“Everyone told me that I had to watch out for Tatsunami Mayu.”

The girl with the swollen red eyes looked at me as though I were some hypothetical enemy of all humanity.

“Do you even know what it is you’re doing?”

Ahh, so that’s it. She thought I was the enemy of all humanity. Nothing hypothetical about it. But, unfortunately, I’m not that grand a person.

I remained silent as the girl in front of me kept haranguing me with one disparaging remark after another.

“They told me I shouldn’t be fooled by your pretty face. You know what, you’re despicable.”

How pitiful. I wonder if she realizes what position she’s put herself in by saying that.

If she thought I was despicable then she would have been better off giving me the cold shoulder and ignoring me completely. By engaging with someone despicable like me, she’s put herself on the same level as me and caused herself more harm than good.

But, what do I know.

Even though I knew it wouldn’t change anything, I couldn’t stop myself from speaking. If she was going to try and wound me with words, why should I refrain from responding in kind.

Which was why, after listening to everything that she had to say, I felt no compunction about kicking her misery into overdrive. In the end, I said just one sentence.

“So, then, your onee-sama had no problem with it at all?”

*

“Waaaaaah”

I was idly watching the young girl as she ran away, crying, towards the school buildings when a voice suddenly called out to me from behind.

“I know I’m just repeating Akiko-san, but you’re despicable.”

Emerging from the bushes with a rustling sound was my classmate, Tanuma Chisato-san.

“I am?”

I laughed. I had no idea that somebody had overheard our conversation. Even if I had known, it probably wouldn’t have stopped me from making her cry. What was her name? ... right, Akiko-san.

“I dropped my hair-clip somewhere around here during lunch, then had to wait until after school to look for it. Then you and Akiko-san came along and started your heart-to-heart talk, so I had to stay hidden until it was over.”

Chisato-san briefly explained how she happened to be there. I knew she wouldn’t have been intentionally eavesdropping anyway.

“So, found your hair-clip?”

Chisato-san responded to my question by shaking her head and saying, “Not yet.”

“Then I’ll help you look for it.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to.”

“Oh, do you feel the same way? That Tatsunami Mayu – ”

“Is someone I have to watch out for?”

Chisato-san snorted derisively.

“I don’t have an onee-sama, so there’s no reason for me to watch out for you.”

“Fair enough.”

The rumor going around was that I meddled catastrophically in other soeurs’ relationships, and was therefore someone to watch out for.

“Hey, hey, which part of me is despicable?”

Ignoring her initial refusal of my offer to help, I followed Chisato-san’s lead and poked around the base of the shrubs and the grassy areas.

“The way you find someone’s sore points and open up those wounds. If you keep doing that, you’ll end up with no friends at all.”

Beaten down by my persistent shadowing of her, Chisato-san relented and allowed me to assist her.

“You know, it’s strange. I’ve heard that advice before, but it sounds more persuasive coming from you, Chisato-san. Because I’m not feeling any resentment. Instead, I’m feeling the love.”

I placed my hand over my heart and smiled. Chisato-san looked shocked as she said:

“There’s no love whatsoever.”

It was only since the beginning of high-school that I had grown close to Chisato-san. Tatsunami and Tanuma in the same class. Opportunities to interact arose from sitting one row apart.

“The sun’s setting, so I wonder if I should just come back and search for it tomorrow morning.”

Chisato-san muttered, intermixed with sighs. Of the straight hair that hung down to her shoulders, the only part that faintly curled was where the hair-clip had been attached this morning.

“So, Chisato-san, why were you walking around here during lunch?”

It was the middle of February. Even when the weather was fine it wasn’t the season to be eating lunch out in the courtyard.

“Well, you see.”

Chisato-san hesitated for a moment, before answering.

“This morning, from inside the school building, I saw Hasekura Rei-sama walking around down here.”

“Rei-sama ... ?”

What came gushing out of Chisato-san’s mouth was the name of the second-year student who was called Rosa Foetia en bouton within the high school. She enjoyed immense popularity with the first-years due to her boyish looks, and Chisato-san was one of her ardent fans.

“I thought she might have been scouting out locations for the treasure hunt.”

The boutons of Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea, and Rosa Foetida had agreed to take part in a treasure hunt event to be held on the upcoming Valentine’s Day. Whoever found the card that a bouton had hidden would win a half-day date with that bouton.

“Scouting? That seems wrong, don’t you think?”

Chisato-san agreed with my opinion.

“I know. There’s no way she’d do something so brazen.”

Even though she knew this, Chisato-san couldn't help but walk over the same ground.

“Did you give Rei-sama chocolates?”

Still squatting on the ground, I turned my gaze towards the grass.

The vigor of summer had departed. There were still plenty of plants in the area, rooted firmly to the ground and untouched by the harsh winter, although most of them would probably be called weeds.

“And you, Mayu-san? It's your first Valentine's Day in high-school.”

Chisato-san turned the question back on me.

“Indeed it is.”

I plucked a single stem of clover that was growing near my feet, snapping it off close to the ground.

“If I gave someone else's onee-sama chocolates, I don't think it would end with them just calling me out to the courtyard after school and berating me.”

“What about your initial onee-sama ... Motoyama Sakae-sama?”

Chisato-san said, somewhat hesitantly.

“And what, reconcile now after having said farewell to her? It's not like I'm Yoshino-san ... ah, sorry.”

Seeing Chisato-san's face go stiff, I put my hand over my mouth. Yoshino-san was the petit soeur of her beloved Rei-sama.

“It's okay. I'm just fed up with the whole Yellow Rose Revolution.”

Chisato-san stood up and stretched. Then, rather than condemning me, she asked me a question, as though she were only trying to find an answer.

“Mayu-san, why are you always doing that sort of thing?”

That sort of thing. – She must be referring to how I was constantly trying to get close to second-year students that already had a *petit soeur*.

“That’s probably because I’m a three-leaf clover, I guess.”

I laughed, then threw the clover I held in my hand as far away as I could.



Back when I was in kindergarten, there was a brief period of time when searching for four-leaf clovers was really popular amongst my friends.

Where did I first hear that finding a four-leaf clover would bring happiness? It was probably from one of my friends who had an older sister, or was friends with someone older, and wanted to sound grown-up.

At any rate, we became obsessed with counting the number of leaves on pieces of clover.

During our free time we’d head out, not sparing a single thought for the swings or other playground equipment.

Luckily, there was a section of the playground where clover grew wild. The teachers adored the cute, white flowers that blossomed in spring, but would prune back the grass that grew too fast in summer. Therefore, they didn’t bother cautioning us kindergarteners when we plucked the pieces of clover.

Nonetheless, it wasn’t that easy to find a four-leaf clover. One by one the kids lost interest in this game and left, until there were only two people remaining. Akemi-chan and myself.

Once I’d considered what would happen if Akemi-chan found a four-leaf clover after I had stopped, there was never any more question about stopping.

Eventually, we came up with some rules that we both followed. Every day we'd mark off a block of land, and search within that area. Usually the block was about 1 metre square.

“Which one do you want?”

Akemi-chan always allowed me to choose first. But I'd often have second thoughts immediately after making my choice.

“Ah, I guess I'll take this one.”

Consequently, we'd often swap places. If Akemi-chan hadn't started searching, she'd let me swap places, saying, “What can you do?” But if she had already started searching, then she wouldn't let me change places with her.

“You can't do that, Mayu-chan.”

She was softly spoken, but even as a child she understood the truth about things.

Then, one day, our game abruptly came to an end. Akemi-chan finally found a four-leaf clover.

I had chosen where to search on that day too.

I viewed that single stalk with its four petals that Akemi-chan grasped in her hand not only as reward for numerous days worth of effort but also as a certificate that promised future happiness.

I blamed myself for letting happiness slip away before my very eyes. I'd thought that if I had chosen the other location, I could have been the one smiling happily and holding aloft the four-leaf clover.

Once Akemi-chan had found one, my fever for four-leaf clover searching suddenly cooled. There probably wasn't just that one four-leaf clover amongst all the clover in the playground. If I had kept searching relentlessly, I too might have found one. But, short-sighted as it may have been, I stopped.

I convinced myself that the gentle Akemi-chan had found one because she was favored by God, whereas I was merely another one of the great mass of three-leaf clovers.

I resigned myself to my fate, abandoning any great expectations.

I'd grown up with my biased parents constantly telling me I was cute, but looking around I saw I was only average in appearance, and definitely not the type of person that grew up to be a beautiful woman.

So, naturally, when I entered into high school I wasn't looking to become the *petit soeur* of a Rose, or a *bouton*, or some other superstar like that.

Cognizant of my average grades and looks, and of my somewhat harsh personality, I was most pleased when a benevolent girl asked to become my *onee-sama* and so I accepted the rosary that was offered to me by my senior in the tennis club, Motoyama Sakae-sama. That was last year, in the first week of May.

My *onee-sama* was gentle and kind. Our relationship wasn't exciting, but I thought it worked out well, in its own way. After all, a school life that was the very picture of ordinariness was only fitting for a three-leaf clover like myself, and I was satisfied with it.

But then, one day in autumn, I heard some news that caused me to flip my way of thinking by a full 180 degrees. Fukuzawa Yumi-san, who I had always considered to be a three-leaf clover much like myself, had become the *petit soeur* of *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, who was admired just as much as Rei-sama. Yumi-san, a completely ordinary girl with no special features or traits.

However, slowly but steadily, Yumi-san started to change. Like the new leaves budding in spring, day by day Yumi matured and began to shine brightly. There was no way she could be called a three-leaf clover any more. At some point she had become a four-leaf clover.

That was when I had a realization. It had to be Sachiko-sama that was making Yumi-san shine. Sachiko-sama hadn't found a four-leaf clover

amongst the three-leaf clovers, she possessed the magical ability to change the three-leaf clover she had accidentally found herself with into a four-leaf clover.

In that case, was there was someone out there who could turn me into a four-leaf clover too? There were plenty of other first-years that were also sparkling, they couldn't all be because of Sachiko-sama's power.

But it was too late for me. It might have been possible if I hadn't already received a rosary, but it had been six months since I'd become a petit soeur and there was no way I could tell my onee-sama, "I've made a mistake." The high-school pecking order was strict, even at the best of times.

Even so, there was a first-year student that had the audacity to pull off such a stunt. Rei-sama's petit soeur, Shimazu Yoshino.

The unprecedented act of a petit soeur casting aside her onee-sama, which came to be known as the "Yellow Rose Revolution," caused a shock amongst the student population and, for a time, it became popular for first-years to imitate Yoshino-san and return the rosary to their onee-samas.

At that time, I too said farewell to Sakae-sama.

"Why?"

Looking at the rosary I had removed from my neck, Sakae-sama had a completely bewildered expression on her face.

"I don't think I'm the right match for you, Sakae-sama."

"But I thought things were going along nicely."

"I'm terribly sorry."

"Oh. I see."

Sakae-sama didn't try to stop me. She simply accepted the rosary in silence, turned her back and walked away. She was probably thinking that at some point I'd regret what I had done and return to her.

Before too long the Yellow Rose Revolution boom came to an end. By and large, the followers once again imitated the originals, with the petit soeurs asking their onee-samas for a reconciliation. Despite this, I never made the request of Sakae-sama. If I had asked her, then I would have just ended up right where I started. Naturally, I quit the tennis club too.

And, after that, I started the search for my true onee-sama. When I found a second-year that interested me, I would proactively call out to her. Usually they would already have a petit soeur, but that didn't bother me. I believed they'd both be happier finding someone who fit them perfectly, rather than struggling to be near each other when they weren't fully compatible. Consequently, I approached them unashamedly. If we had similar hobbies, I'd meet them outside of school.

However, after we'd grown a bit closer, I would invariably start to feel a sense of discomfort. At first everything would seem fresh, but then I would realize that, just like Sakae-sama, this person couldn't make me shine either. So I'd go searching for the next one.

And if the previous person had split up with her petit soeur, there was nothing I could do about that. I never said, "Break up with your petit soeur," or "Make me your petit soeur." If a pair of soeurs break up just because a third person gets close to them, then they were probably always going to break up anyway.

* * *

On the day after Valentine's Day, Chisato-san spotted me the moment she walked in to the classroom, came rushing over and said:

"What should I do about the date with Rei-sama?"

I had elected to have a quiet Valentine's Day, and had gone home early instead of participating in the treasure hunt. Consequently, I initially had absolutely no idea why Chisato-san was so excited.

“A group of us found the card. Then I won it with rock. You see.”

From what I could gather, the rules stipulated that in the event that multiple people found the treasure card simultaneously, they would have a playoff of scissors, paper, rock to determine the winner, and blessed Chisato-san had earned that privilege.

“I have to write a report about it, which will be a major pain, but still I’m –”

“Going to steal her?”

I interrupted Chisato-san’s excited chatter.

“Huh?”

“Well, Chisato-san, you’ve spent a lot of time thinking about Yoshino-san, right? You’ve said to me, “That accursed girl manipulates wonderful Rei-sama.””

“Well, I know I said that, but still.”

My proposal was certainly unconventional, and perhaps because of that Chisato-san looked down and said, “I don’t know ... ”

“It would have been poor form to split them up while Yoshino-san was still unhealthy, but she’s fine now, right?”

“Well, she was running around yesterday, albeit rather slowly.”

“In that case, there’s no reason for you to hold back.”

At that time, I wasn’t looking to tar Chisato-san with the same brush that had been applied to me.

Instead, I felt that if Chisato-san and Rei-sama worked well as a couple then it would be a vindication of my own beliefs. That I too might be able to find an onee-sama who fit me perfectly.

* * * *

Not long thereafter, an unlikely rumor made its way around the school.

I think it was after school on Friday when a first-year from the tennis club made her way to my classroom and said:

“Have you heard that Sakae-sama has a petit soeur?”

“Huh?”

She overlooked my momentary unrest.

“Ah, but I don’t suppose you’d be interested in hearing about that, Mayu-san.”

Even though she was acting polite, it was quite obvious that she was thinking, “Serves you right.”

Her onee-sama wasn’t someone that I’d tried to get close to. And yet she still despised me. It looked like I was an enemy to all first-years, after all.

“It all started a few days ago, on Valentine’s Day, when she gave Sakae-sama chocolates.”

Those kind of details were completely irrelevant.

“Who?”

I asked, irritated.

“Want me to tell you?”

The girl from the tennis club smirked.

“If you want me to tell you then you’ll have to bow down before me and say, “Please tell me.””

What was she thinking?

“I refuse.”

My voice was shaking from anger. My face twitched.

“I have no desire to bow down to the likes of you.”

I spat out those words then walked out of the classroom and into the hallway. Aimlessly. Knowing only that I no longer wanted to be around that girl.

“Wh, what did you say – !?”

I heard her hysterical cries coming from behind me. Like hell I’d bow down to someone who came all the way over to our classroom just so she could laugh as she watched me bowing.

I walked out of the building to escape the suffocating feeling. I was still wearing my indoor shoes, but that was of no concern to me. I stamped onwards. My feet were moving before I had time to think about it. Almost as though they weren’t my feet at all.

My feet stopped at the fork in the road, in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

Just what on earth was I doing? I came to my senses, found it all too ridiculous, and a laughing cough slipped out between ragged breaths.

Even though there was nothing I should be running away from. If I truly believed that what I was doing was 100% correct, then I should have been able to stand my ground regardless of what anyone else said. But since I couldn’t, did that mean that there was a part of me that was feeling somewhat guilty about this, after all?

If so, what should I do?

I took no pleasure from splitting apart happy soeurs.

I only wanted to shine brightly and become a four-leaf clover. So why did things turn out the way they did?

I prayed to Maria-sama. I desperately wanted Maria-sama, who silently watches over us, to answer my question.

What should I do to find happiness?

No miracle would take place, no matter how faithfully I prayed.

I wasn't expecting to open my eyes and see my kind onee-sama standing there, waiting for me with lots of friends.

(But, what if.)

I asked myself a question. Would I really want to go back to the day when I informed Sakae-sama that I was breaking up with her and redo things?

But I couldn't answer. Because somebody called out my name.

“Mayu?”

I lowered my hands and turned around. Standing there was Sakae-sama.

“Onee ... ”

I started to speak, but then stopped myself. She was no longer my onee-sama.

“It's been a while. How are you?”

We were still students in the same high-school. Even after the break-up, I'd seen her around school numerous times. But never this close, and we'd never exchanged words before now.

That was because I'd gone to great lengths to ensure we didn't meet. If I spotted Sakae-sama coming towards me down a corridor, I'd turn around and head back where I was coming from, or escape via a nearby stairway.

And if I found out that a second-year student I was interested in was in Sakae-sama's class, then I'd give up on talking to her.

But there was nowhere for me to hide from this sort of surprise attack. I looked up at Maria-sama bitterly.

However, the person that I had probably hurt the most didn't say a single resentful word, instead she smiled gently at me.

"What's the matter? Did something happen to you?"

Why was she being so sympathetic to the person who had hurt her?

As though everything in the past hadn't happened. The innocence of a chance reunion with a friend that you'd drifted apart from.

"Sakae-sama."

For a moment I thought that this could have been a miracle brought about by Maria-sama. That Maria-sama had taken pity on me and reset everything, giving me a chance to fix things.

"I – "

Just as I was reaching out my hand.

"Sorry I kept you waiting, onee-sama."

A student ran up to Sakae-sama from behind.

"I had left it in the classroom, just like I thought... Ah."

Memories came flooding back to me. The new arrival seemed to realize who was standing beside Sakae-sama the moment she saw me too.

"Mayu-san?"

"... Akemi-san."

After seeing the two first-years greet each other by name, Sakae-sama said:

“Huh? Oh, that’s right. You’ve both been here since preschool. Of course you’d know each other.”

“Uh ..., yeah.”

Even as I nodded, my chest was almost bursting from the violent thumping of my heart.

Ahh, so that’s how it was. I quickly grasped the situation. So I immediately forced a smile, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to deal with this at all.

“I heard you two became soeurs, right?”

Despite the shock I had just received, that piece of information hadn’t been forgotten. More for the sake of a peaceful world than for my own sense of self-respect.

“Word travels fast.”

The pair smiled shyly at each other.

“One of my friends from the tennis club came over to tell me about it straight away ... ”

I suppose my acting had been up to the challenge. Either that or the gentle, quiet Sakae-sama couldn’t have conceived of me lying about such a thing.

“Oh, really. That’s good. I was worried about you Mayu, since you stopped coming to club activities right after we broke up. But you’re still talking to the first-years from the tennis club. That’s a relief.”

“Yeah.”

I agreed eagerly, so as not to shatter that sense of relief. It was strange, but after that I no longer felt like I hated that tennis club girl from before.

“So, what are you doing out here, Mayu?”

“I think I dropped one of my hair-clips around here during lunch.”

The explanation that came easily from my mouth was stolen straight from Chisato-san.

“Shall we search for it together?”

Akemi-san asked, bright-eyed. She didn’t know that I didn’t habitually wear anything like a hair-clip.

“No, it’s all right.”

I declined, shaking my head.

“The sun’s starting to set, so I think I’ll just come to school a bit early tomorrow and search for it then. Plus, it might not be here anyway.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, thanks anyway.”

If Akemi-san put her mind to searching for it, it seemed likely that she’d really find a hair-clip that didn’t exist.

“Well then, I have to head back to the classroom.”

“Okay, gokigenyou.”

After confirming that they were walked away, I turned back towards the school buildings.

* * * * *

On Monday, I ate lunch alone at my desk then left the classroom. I was walking down the hallway, on the way back from Milk Hall, when I bumped into Chisato-san.

“Got a minute?”

Chisato-san pointed towards the courtyard.

“Sure.”

Thinking she just wanted to have a chat, I nodded my head and we walked outside together.

Even though we were in the same class, the only thing I had said to Chisato-san all morning was “Gokigenyou.”

As soon as the lunch break started, Chisato-san had been surrounded by our fellow classmates barraging her with questions about her half-day date with Hasekura Rei-sama on Sunday, so there had been no opening for me to approach her.

“What happened to all the people you had glued to you?”

“I kept telling them that I couldn’t say anything until the report was published in the Lillian Kwaraban. Eventually they got the message.”

“I see.”

This place had seemed like a frozen winter garden back when we walked around here searching for that hair-clip. But now, with the sun overhead, it felt so warm it was like a completely different place.

It had only been a matter of days since then. I suppose that meant spring was just around the corner.

“So? How was your date oh.”

I trailed off mid-sentence. Chisato-san had just said that she couldn’t talk about it until the report was published. Nonetheless.

“That was just an expedience. There’s no gag-order, or anything like that.”

Chisato-san stuck her tongue out cheekily.

“I just didn’t want to talk about it. But there was something I wanted to tell you, Mayu-san... See, because of what happened, I’ve changed the way I’ve been thinking about things.”

“What?”

“You told me to split them apart, right?”

“You’re talking about Rei-sama?”

I asked, even though I had said that.

“While you were the one who said it, in truth, I’d been thinking it as well. After all, I’d cherish Rei-sama so much more than Yoshino-san does. I thought that if I could just get close to her, then she’d see that there were other girls out there that were so much nicer. That was my honest expectation. For our date.”

“And? Your expectations were dashed?”

I asked, and Chisato-san’s response was, “Not quite.”

“Rei-sama was even more wonderful than I expected. But then I realized, somewhere within that wonderful Rei-sama was Yoshino-san.”

“You mean in her thoughts?”

“That’s not it. I don’t really know how to explain it, but a part of Rei-sama’s charm existed because of Yoshino-san. Let’s say I managed to snatch Rei-sama away from Yoshino-san. I think I’d feel like there was something missing from that Rei-sama. What I like is the Rei-sama that’s mixed with Yoshino-san. And so ... ”

“I get it.”

I said, and Chisato-san’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Really? From an explanation like that?”

“Yeah, I get it. Because I’ve been thinking something similar recently.”

This time it was my turn to tell the story.

“Sakae-sama has a petit soeur.”

“... So I’ve heard. The girls in the tennis club were all making a fuss about it.”

“And her partner, a masterpiece. Koiso Akemi-san. It’s like, geeze, I give up. Well played, Maria-sama.”

Chisato-san apparently didn’t appreciate my attempt at humor because she had a sullen look on her face.

“I mean, Sakae-sama looked to me like a wonderful lady.”

“A wonderful lady?”

“Right, a wonderful lady. And I was shocked to think that I had broken up with such a wonderful lady.”

But the thing that shocked me the most was how happy I felt after seeing them together. It was funny the way the sense of utmost regret turned to acceptance of what seemed inevitable.

“It was Akemi-san that made her such a wonderful lady. Again, a complete defeat for me. But that complete defeat was really refreshing.”

“Yeah. That’s how I felt too.”

As we walked around the courtyard, we rubbed shoulders and laughed. Each of us with the knowledge that the one who best understood our feelings was the friend beside us.

“Ah, so that’s where it is.”

Chisato-san suddenly squatted down and said, “My hair-clip.”

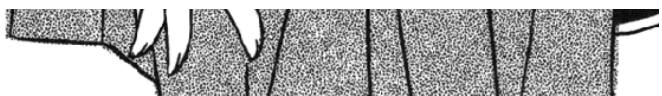
“Really? So you didn’t find it earlier?”

I leaned over and followed Chisato-san’s gaze.

“Wait, look. That’s got to be somebody’s prank, right?”

The silver hair-clip, decorated with flowers, had numerous pieces of clover growing through the part that holds on to the hair. The whole thing looked as though the clover was hair that the hair-clip was fastened to.





“Wouldn’t it just grow naturally like that because of all the warm weather we’ve been having?”

I gently stroked the leaves of the clover that had been bunched together by the hair-clip. Clumped together as they were, it looked like there were five- and six-leaf clovers, never mind just three- or four-leaf ones.

“Maybe.”

Chisato-san extracted her hair-clip from the bunch of clover.

“Even though I’ve finally found it, I won’t have any use for it soon.”

I looked at Chisato-san, uncomprehending, and she said:

“I was thinking of getting my hair cut short. Just like that.”

My friend smiled as she made a chopping motion across her shoulder-length hair. She’d probably look good with short-hair. But I, with my shorter hair, couldn’t drastically change my hair just by cutting it.

So I decided to ask Chisato-san for that hair-clip for which she would soon have no use.

“Sure. It’s only a cheapie, though.”

As she said this, Chisato-san stepped behind me, gathered the hair from the side of my head and clicked the hair-clip in place.

And with that, the lie that I had told Sakae-sama and Akemi-san had been turned into truth.

Freed from the hair-clip, the three-leaf clovers fluttered in the breeze.

“It’s beautiful,” I thought.

Frame of Mind 3

“I should be heading back soon.”

Katsura-san smiled, holding the photograph.

She explained that she'd told the third-years she was leaving the tennis court because she had to go to the toilet. If she stayed too long, they might start to worry that she was sick. Of course the first- and second-years knew why Katsura-san had really left so they could try to smooth things over, but it was better if they didn't have to.

Yumi and Tsutako-san both agreed with this logic and cheerfully saw their friend off. After all, they had no reason to detain Katsura-san any longer.

“That reminds me. What's up with that girl?”

Katsura-san said, stopping in front of the biscuit-door and turning to look at them.

“That girl?”

“You know, that first year student with the fluffy hair ... umm, Tsutako-san's petit soeur?”

The ‘petit soeur’ part was probably cheating, nonetheless Tsutako-san understood who Katsura-san meant because she responded with, “You mean Shouko-chan?” as she continued to arrange the photographs spread across the table. Shouko-chan was seen with Tsutako-san so frequently that most people thought they were soeurs.

Katsura-san then told them about how she had initially gone to the photography club's clubroom in search of Tsutako-san. When she got there, that fluffy-haired first-year had been encamped by the door and explained that Tsutako-san wasn't in. But then she kept badgering Katsura-san, asking what business she had with Tsutako-san.

“Do I really have to get permission from your petit soeur just to see my friend?”

Katsura-san said indignantly. In response, Tsutako-san stopped putting photographs back into envelopes and tilted her head inscrutably.

“I wonder what she was doing at the clubhouse. Ahh, and just a correction, Shouko-chan is not my petit soeur.”

And then Yumi remembered something too. Earlier, Tsutako-san had said that third-years had taken control of the clubroom, etc. Based on Tsutako-san’s reaction, there was no way that information hadn’t also been passed along to Shouko-chan.

“And?”

Yumi urged Katsura-san to continue. What happened next?

“What could I do? I said I had something I wanted to ask you, and she finally let me go. And if she’s not your petit soeur, then that’s even worse. Is she trying to be your secretary or something?”

“Now, now. Shouko-chan really looks up to Tsutako-san. You should just let it slide, this time.”

“I know. But she was so inflexible for a first year. There was a real obstinate directness in the way she was behaving.”

Katsura-san had probably caused her fair share of grief for the seniors in the tennis club in that respect too. Maybe she’d heard something that caused her to reflect on how she’d been. Katsura-san smiled the tolerant smile of an onee-sama, then opened the door and left.

“Say. Why don’t you take Shouko-chan as your petit soeur?”

Yumi asked, once they were alone again. She’d always wondered that, especially since they were so close that everyone already thought they were soeurs.

“Let’s see.”

Tsutako-san smiled, then started taking photos out of a new envelope and lining them up on the table.

“Just being soeurs isn’t everything, you know?”

The photos Tsutako-san laid down were, unusually, all pictures of girls in civilian clothes.

Sprouts in Dry Wood

“Onee-chan.”

It was the evening of January 10 – the week-long New Year’s festivities were over and it was the day before Kagami Biraki, the traditional breaking of the rice cakes – when my little sister came to visit me in my room, holding a single photograph.

“What do you want?”

I brusquely lifted my gaze from the university textbook.

As always.

I’m not sure how people generally treat their little sisters, but I never welcomed her with a smile. It had been that way for so long that to change it now just felt wrong.

Shouko and I were the real deal, blood related sisters, but our appearance and personality, and while I’m at it even our names, were completely different. Either because of that, or the three-year age gap between us, we never really fought, but neither did our relationship develop to the point where we could talk to each other about anything and everything.

So when my little sister came to my room it was usually because she wanted to borrow the huge dictionary I owned, or something similar, and even that happened very rarely.

“Onee-chan, this is for you...”

And despite that, she was now earnestly offering me this snapshot.

“What the heck is this?”

The expression on Shouko’s face said that she was still undecided about whether or not she should be showing me this photograph.

“Let’s see it.”

I took the photograph from my little sister’s hand and looked at it. And then, immediately.

“_”

I was speechless.

From the glimpses of the scenery I got while Shouko was holding the photograph, it was obviously taken at a Shinto shrine during the New Year’s celebrations.

Shouko had gone on the traditional New Year’s shrine visit with a friend from school this year. Consequently, I expected it to be a photo that was taken then, but I was wrong.

The moment I got my hands on the photograph I realized it wasn’t some trite New Year’s shrine photograph.

“... How?”

Unable to conceal my disturbance, I asked that question looking straight at my little sister.

In the center of the photograph was a girl, smiling brilliantly, who up until last year had been my classmate at school.



That classmate always looked untroubled as she walked ahead of me.

If asked, she’d probably say it wasn’t like that at all. No, she’d definitely say that. But, back then, that was the only way I thought of her. Looking untroubled as she walked ahead of me.

She looked as though she never studied, either at school or at home, but she always got near perfect scores on the tests. She always had a bored expression on her face, but was effortlessly at the center of attention.

I couldn't stand that type of person. I didn't go as far as wishing ill upon her, but I couldn't accept all the things she achieved. It just felt like her entire existence was a complete negation of my own, hard-working one.

So I stuck to my guns. I re-doubled my effort, thinking that I would overtake her and therefore retain my self-respect.

My plan was to get accepted into some super-elite university where she couldn't follow, and then bid farewell to my demeaning high-school life.

So I devoted my three years of high-school to studying, always looking towards graduation day when I would smile victoriously. I didn't make any of those special nurturing relationships while I was at Lillian's Girls Academy, acknowledging neither a petit soeur nor an onee-sama.

But when I opened the lid, what did I find? She hadn't even shown up to fight.

What did it mean? I asked myself over and over again.

I knew all about marking relative to the curve and grade inflation, but how could someone like myself who was accepted into the top course at what was generally acknowledged as the top university in the country not win? That was just idiotic.

But that idiocy was reality.

She was continuing her studies at the fine arts department of another university. What a joke.

When I first heard about her choice, I actually broke into laughter.

But with this, there was no contest.

In much the same way that you can't compare a boxer to a sumo wrestler – even though they're both contact sports, they're just too different. They're literally two different arenas.

I lost sight of my goal just as I was about to reach it. It was as though my life plan of getting good grades then getting a good job was hazing over.

What happened? I hadn't thought that I'd been studying on account of her. But after entering university, I found that studying just wasn't as fun without her untroubled visage walking ahead of me.

That state of affairs continued day after day for about eight months, until one day.

It would have been around the middle of December when I saw 'that.'

I went to my little sister's room, for the first time in a while, to retrieve the Japanese-English dictionary she had borrowed from me the night before.

Shouko wasn't there. She'd gone to school.

Since I was only looking for my book, I didn't hesitate to open the door. She'd occasionally go into my room when I was out and our mother was often entering our rooms to do the cleaning, so there was nothing wrong with it. Anything of value to her would probably be in her drawers, and I wasn't going to open those, so I thought there'd be nothing to worry about.

I first looked over her study desk. But my dictionary wasn't there. So I slowly spun around, taking in the whole room.

The items on the built-in bookshelf didn't seem to be related to studying – there were teen novels, books about sweets, teen fashion magazines and favorite stuffed animals and picture books from her childhood all arranged haphazardly. No, there probably was a method to it. A method called, "Girl's Bookshelf."

"Hmmm."

I had a bookshelf roughly identical to that one in my room, but the contents were completely different.

This was a new experience.

It wasn't quite jealousy. It was just, no, it was exactly that.

In the end, I found my dictionary on top of her bed. She probably put it there when she was making her bed, intending to return it on the way out of the house, but then forgot about it.

Now that I had achieved my goal, I fully intended to leave my little sister's room immediately. But right at that moment I caught a glimpse of a reflection that caused my slippers to do a complete 180 degree turn.

I walked over to the bookshelf.

I ran my finger along the spine of the book that seemed out of place on a "Girl's Bookshelf."

"A photography book...?"

Not a collection of photographs. But a technical reference about cameras and the techniques involved in photography.

"What would this kind of thing be doing in Shouko's room?"

When my little sister was younger she had adorable features. My parents were persuaded by some of their acquaintances and, for a while, she had been a child model. Her dislike of photographs had probably come from that stint as a model. But despite that – .

"I wonder if something happened to her... "

Come to think of it, I knew all kinds of complicated mathematical equations, vocabulary words and grammar points, but I knew very little about my little sister.

From an older sister's point-of-view, "Naitou Shouko" was a somewhat cute, well-mannered girl who hated to study but other than that was probably having an enjoyable school-life. A silly girl.

"But."

Would a girl who hated studying borrow a dictionary from an older sister she didn't get along with all that well?

"That's right."

Shouko had a Japanese-English dictionary, no, make that two. Either of those should have sufficed for first-year high-school homework. Although it looked like they were from a different publisher. I suppose our parents were only making sure we got the same type of things as we grew.

"That reminds me."

What Shouko had borrowed was the number one ranked, most densely packed with information dictionary intended for adults. When I was in high-school, I would beg my parents to buy me these as birthday and Christmas presents.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to understand more.

Shouko and myself, at her age, both had something we craved.

"..."

I put the photography book back on the bookshelf. At which point, some of the books tilted slightly. The act of taking the book out and then putting it back seemed to have disrupted their balance.

(Disrupted?)

But it looked like the books were all lined up alongside each other without a gap between them. The fallen book, rather than being sandwiched by the books on either side, looked as though it was placed free standing beside the books on my side.

“... Right?”

With an ominous feeling, I checked the book that I inferred to be free standing and found it was actually being used to mask a gap beside it. Moving away from the doorway’s line-of-sight, a gap of approximately 15cm appeared.

“Why such an elaborate setup?”

Adorning that spot, hidden away from public gaze, was a photo frame. Inside that marble patterned frame was a sepia-toned photograph of two young women wearing school uniforms.

It was myself and Shouko.

Taking great care not to disturb the books on either side, I timidly picked up the photo frame.

– No doubt about it. I felt a little bit giddy.

Why would Shouko have this? Who on earth could have taken that photograph?

But asking Shouko about the picture frame she had setup in a hidden location on her bookshelf was something that I was reluctant to do, even as her sister.

I couldn’t just barge in to her private life.

But even so. That photograph was fixed in my mind forever.

I couldn’t believe that I could look as beautiful as I did in that photo.

The expression I had in that picture was nowhere to be found in my own photo albums. In both the class photos and the snapshots from athletics carnivals and school festivals, I always had this tense look that seemed to ask, “Am I going to fail?”

In contrast, the classmate who looked untroubled as she walked ahead of me was always beautiful.

Her melancholic face, her convulsively laughing face, her icy smile. All of her various facial expressions were radiant like a flower.

When we were in the same frame, I would always be standing some distance apart from her, shoulders stiff like I was meeting an enemy, even going so far as to scowl at the camera lens.

Just what on earth had I been fighting?

The person I thought I had been fighting had been paying absolutely no attention to me.

For the first time in ages, I flipped through my photo album, looking at the me from high-school and shedding a few tears.

Now I understood. In reality, I was still the same person as in the photograph in Shouko's room, and I wanted a picture showing myself smiling gently and at peace with that classmate.

(But it's too late now ...)

I wiped away my tears and hurriedly closed the album.

It wasn't like me to think about such things. Losing sight of my study goals had probably caused me to go soft.

If only I'd realized this before graduation. Now that we were going to different universities there was nothing much I could do about it. Even I knew that.

I went for the traditional New Year's shrine visit on January 2, this year. The shrine I visited was close to my alma mater, Lillian's Girls Academy.

Was it nostalgia?

No, I didn't go there because I wanted to return to my high-school days. I went to make an offering as repayment for the 'success in school' charm that I had bought there last year.

"Looks like no-one's going to show up, after all."

Standing in front of the shrine's torii, I looked at my phone and sighed. It was already twenty minutes past one in the afternoon.

"I wasn't really expecting much."

Still, I hadn't expected that I would be the only one who would show up, as arranged.

Can't do anything about that. Given how things had turned out, I thought I'd do what I came to do quickly and then return home. Even if I waited longer, it didn't look like anyone else was going to come. Since we'd arranged a time, they'd probably have sent an SMS if they were going to be late.

It was on this very day, last year. Four classmates came to this place for their first shrine visit of the New Year. We were high-school third-years, preparing for exams.

The organizer (not myself) had apparently invited everyone in our class who was sitting for exams but the first three days of the new year are always busy so not everyone could attend. Naturally, "that girl" had also been invited, but she just looked uninterested as she fiddled with her hair and muttered:

"I'd like to go, but my family always spends New Year's in Hawaii."

I watched that happen from a short distance away. I still remember the conflicting feelings I felt when I heard that she wasn't going to be there – part of me was relieved, but part of me was disappointed. This was at the second semester closing ceremony.

When the day arrived there were only four people, including myself, that hadn't canceled. We formed a strange bond there, perhaps because of the haphazard way the group was assembled, and promised to return and give thanks at the same place, on the same hour of the same day, the following year.

But it looked like nobody else remembered the promise that they'd made a year ago.

Maybe they forgot about it as soon as they passed their exams. Maybe they didn't have time to look back at their old friends now that they were following their new life. At any rate, a no-show is a no-show.

I walked alone, following the same path into the shrine that we had taken last year. I stopped in front of the offering box, threw some coins in, clasped my hands together in prayer and reported my success.

Thinking back on it, it's a bit strange that a group of students at a Catholic school would see no problem with going to a Shinto shrine to pray for success in their examinations. But while I was inside the garden that was Lillian's, those kind of feelings were muted. Perhaps it's one of those things that only becomes visible when you take a step back from it.

(Although it's interesting to note that the fortune papers offered at Shinto shrines were first used by the Tendai sect of Buddhists.)

Since he died on the third day of the year, he became known as Gansan Daishi.³ Since tomorrow would be the anniversary of his death, I took a fortune paper as a way of showing my respect.

This is a reference to Ryougen, a Tendai monk. Gansan means third day of the year, and Daishi is a name for a spiritual leader.
<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ry%C5%8Dgen> has a little bit more information about him.

— A blessing.

“Your wish will be granted. The person that you’re waiting for will arrive ... huh.”

I chuckled when I read the fortune printed on the paper.

I had a blessing last year as well, but this year’s seemed somewhat better.

From memory, last year’s was “Your wish is beyond our power. The person that you’re waiting for will not arrive. They will move away from you. Your loss will become apparent.” The four of us had shared a laugh wondering what part of that was a blessing.

Still, it felt like the fortune paper had somehow sensed my feelings.

That girl I was waiting for would not arrive. Because she would not arrive, I could look at this calmly.

(Ahh, that’s right.)

Back then, somehow under the influence of that fortune, I had bought another one of those ‘success in school’ charms. One more, beyond the one I bought for myself.

(... They will move away from you.)

Gradually, the memories returned. I lied to my classmates, telling them I forgot to buy an ‘easy childbirth’ charm for an older cousin, then went back and bought it.

Then on the first day of the third semester.

I left the paper bag containing that charm inside “that girl’s” shoe box. Neither she nor anyone else knew that it was from me. At the time, that charm was as dangerous and terrifying to me as a bomb or a gun.

(Sheesh.)

As I laughed at how I was a year ago, I looked around for a branch to attach the fortune paper to. I guess that difference is what they call maturity. Either

that or regression. Being inside the vortex, the current me couldn't say.

I looked up at the sky for a while, then lowered my gaze.

What's with that tree? At first glance it seemed to be withered, but something about it caught my eye.

The trunk seemed to be crumbling and all the leaves had fallen from the branches but there were small groups of fortune papers tied around it here and there, looking like white flowers in bloom.

I too made a single flower bloom there.

After tying the fortune to the tree, and just as I was about to start walking again, I saw someone I knew amongst the crowd.

“... That's.”

I only caught a glimpse of her profile, but there was no doubt in my mind. It wasn't her face that was so memorable, it was her trademark glasses and camera that gave it away.

The first-year from the photography club, Takeshima Tsutako. No, wait, that's what she was when I was still in high-school. Since she's two years below me, she should be a second-year by now.

She took better photographs of “that girl” than anybody else. During the school festival, in the photography club's exhibition room, I forgot how to move for a while as I stood in front of the photograph of “that girl” smiling at me.

(Again ...)

Why was I remembering all these things that were long past? And why was I remembering only things that I could do nothing about?

(Enough already.)

Better to lay these intractable old memories to rest with my old charm. I hurried over to the bonfire where you could burn old charms and amulets.

Right, that will be good.

While I was still vacillating about whether or not to call out to Tsutako-san, she was swallowed up by the crowd and disappeared from sight entirely.

So I decided to part ways with my charm and head home, feeling refreshed. I jogged off, forcing my way through the crowd.

There weren't any signposts pointing towards the bonfire but it was easy enough to find. The white smoke stung my eyes.

“Huh!?”

Just as I arrived at the bonfire, my heart jumped in shock.

“Oh.”

One of the people waiting in line for the bonfire saw my face and smiled unguardedly at me.

“Fancy meeting you here, Katsumi-san.”

– It was the person I refer to as “that girl” – Torii Eriko-san.

The youthful short pink jacket and matching brown checkered skirt she wore made her look younger than when she was wearing Lillian's uniform.

“Why?”

I was in such a state of confusion that I blurted out what I was thinking.

Why was this girl, who hadn't deviated from her family's tradition of spending the New Year's period in Hawaii even when she was preparing for university entrance exams, spending this New Year's period in-country? No, it's not even about domestic versus international. More specifically, since this was right near our alma mater, this was her 'home town.'

“Ahh. You’re surprised that I came here when I wasn’t a member of last year’s visit, Katsumi-san?”

Eriko-san smiled as she opened one of her coat pockets and took something out, then showed it to me, saying, “Tadaaah.”

“You see, I have one of these charms too.”

“_”

It was, undoubtedly, the exact same charm as the one I had. A ‘success in school’ charm with this shrine’s name printed on it.

“It was placed in my shoe box on the day of the third-semester opening ceremony. I never did find out who put it there, but I passed all my exams so it must have been a divine blessing. So I thought I’d buy one for Rei ..., my little sister. She’s sitting her exams this year.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Your group were all excited about coming back in a year’s time to return the charms, right? I thought there was the possibility we’d meet, so it was only right that I should come and have a look. I didn’t know the exact time, but as long as I came there was always a chance.”

“Ohh.”

The only way I could keep her from realizing that my voice was shaking was by making monosyllabic replies.

Even so, small fragments of what Eriko-san said, like “divine blessing,” “little sister,” and “only right that I should come,” were bouncing around in my head like they were on a trampoline.

“I’ve been busy coming up with topics for submission.”

“Men – what are they thinking? Hmm, maybe it’s just that they look like they’re thinking, but they’re not really.”

“We had a huge fight trying to co-ordinate our New Year’s schedules.”

Eriko-san talked about her university life, about the troubles she was having with the guy she was dating, and complained about the various schemes her father and brothers came up with to try and split them apart, one after the other.

In return, I talked a little bit about how recently I’d felt as though I didn’t really know my little sister.

At the bonfire we both put some money into the offertory box, joined our hands in prayer, then threw our charms from last year into the fire together.

“See you later.”

We exchanged goodbyes as though we were still classmates who would see each other tomorrow then went our separate ways. We only spent about 15 minutes together; Eriko-san said there were people she had arranged to meet. It was probably her petit soeur from high-school, Hasekura Rei-san. Or if the rumors just prior to graduation were true, it might be the science teacher from Hanadera Academy.

As I watched her walk away, I thought that I should have called out to Takeshima Tsutako-san when I caught that glimpse of her before. If I had, she undoubtedly would have been able to get a good photograph of us together.

Why?

Because, if only for a brief moment, we were standing together, smiling, as though we were former close friends.

Even if it did look awkward, I was smiling at somebody.

Inside that dream-like time.

In the end, I kept going over what I should have done.

Back then. Even though it's possible I only met Eriko-san because I didn't chase after Takeshima Tsutako-san.



“... How?”

Which brings us back to today. My little sister had shown me that picture. A photograph of Torii Eriko-san.

“An older girl from school happened to run into Torii Eriko-sama.”

“Ah, right.”

There was no need to ask where or when this took place.

That “older girl” had probably called out to Eriko-san because in the photo she was looking straight at the camera and smiling, wearing the same pink coat that I remembered. Yep, this photo was taken on the second of January this year, at that shrine. Also –

“This is you here, onee-chan.”

Shouko pointed to a small figure in the background behind Eriko-san.

I'd noticed that as soon as I saw the photo. Unmistakeably, that was me.

Until it was shown to me, I'd had no idea that a photo like this existed. Because, naturally, I hadn't noticed the camera.

There had been people everywhere when I went to the shrine, with photos being taken left, right and center. You couldn't respond to each and every camera pointed in your general direction.

In the photograph, I was standing some distance behind Eriko-san, oblivious to the fact that she was there, my gaze slightly elevated and smiling.

The mystery of why I had that expression on my face was soon solved. I was looking for a branch to tie my fortune paper to. In one hand I was grasping the slender fortune paper as though I was ready to knot it.

Before I blossomed a “flower” on that tree.

“The older girl didn’t notice you in the photo, onee-chan, but I saw you straight away. Then I wondered if I should say anything ... but, finally, I thought I should give this to you.”

“Okay.”

I decided to gratefully accept my little sister’s kindness.

“I see.”

A year ago, I probably would have responded angrily with, “Why bother me with such a frivolous thing.” I would have been angry about having my feelings seen through. But now I knew that such a response was meaningless.

The Eriko-san in the photograph smiled, as if to say, “That’s right.”

“And this too.”

Shouko held out another photograph. It was exactly the same as the one I held in my hands.

“Huh?”

“There were two copies printed, so could you deliver this one, onee-chan?”

To Eriko-san.

“Sure.”

Sure, I could do that. That's what I'll do. I nodded.

"Okay then."

Her business completed, my little sister looked relieved as she was about to leave the room when I stopped her by saying, "Shouko."

"Give my thanks to Takeshima Tsutako-san."

Shouko stopped, and turned around with a surprised look on her face.

"How did you know?"

Which meant I must have guessed right. I suppose my instincts aren't that bad after all.

"Hohoho. Don't underestimate your older sister. I've been around three years longer than you."

"Ooooh."

Shouko gave a small squeal then quickly ran away. In some ways she was still childishly cute.

"Looks like she's having a fun time at high-school."

I laughed and lined up the two photographs on my desk.

I was going to write a letter, using delivery of the photograph as a pretext. I wasn't going to write about our meeting, instead I'd write about my current life at university or about my time at Lillian's high-school. To say that we could meet up for no reason at all and talk to each other, if she felt so inclined.

No, it would be for a reason.

Because we were compatriots who had studied in the same classroom.

That by itself should be enough.

I opened my university text that was sitting beside the photographs. For some reason, I had the urge to study.

Not so that I could beat Eriko-san, but so that I could walk beside her. So we could both share the same view and smile.

Even though we were walking down different paths, at some point in time we would meet again and I wanted to be able to proudly describe how I was living my life.

It will soon be spring.

Even that withered tree I saw will soon have green sprouts, and probably bloom not long after.

Frame of Mind 4

“Huh?”

Yumi murmured. She had a feeling she’d forgotten something.

“The keyword was ‘photography club.’ ... No, probably just ‘photograph.’ What was it, something that I had to remember to do.”

Even with this hint, there’s no way that Tsutako-san would be able to give her the answer. But when the ball that she had half-heartedly thrown out returned, it landed fair in the middle of her glove.

“Say, Yumi-san, wasn’t there something you wanted to see me about.”

“Something I wanted to see you about? No, I only asked you to the Rose Mansion because you were doing your club work all alone.”

“Not that. After you’d emptied the rubbish bin, when you came back into the classroom. You saw me and said something like, “There she is. Lucky.””

“Aren’t you thinking of Katsura-san?”

But as she said this, Yumi slowly remembered.

“Right, I definitely said that.”

Ah, there she is. Lucky.

She’d said those words when she saw Tsutako-san sitting there and was relieved that she wouldn’t have to walk all the way over to the clubhouse. But then she’d completely forgotten about it as she looked over the photographs spread out across Tsutako-san’s desk and they’d talked about her eviction from the clubroom.

“If you knew about this, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Ah. I’d forgotten about it too, until just recently.”

“Just recently?”

“Katsura-san’s arrival. It blended with your arrival back in the classroom and triggered the memory.”

But then Tsutako-san too had forgotten about it while she talked to Katsura-san. Geeze, this wasn’t the kind of thing you’d expect from two young people.

“So, before I forget again.”

Yumi reached her hand into her skirt pocket, pulled something out and offered it to Tsutako-san. Looking slightly triumphant as she did so. Ahh – thank-you Yumi-san. I’d been looking for that, wondering where it went. That kind of expression of gratitude was what Yumi had been expecting to hear. However.

“What’s this?”

Tsutako-san tilted her head and took a long, hard look at what Yumi was holding. Obviously, Tsutako-san didn’t mean that literally. She would know better than anyone else on campus what ‘that’ was.

“You must have dropped it, Tsutako-san. Some kind first-years picked it up. They asked me to give it to you because we’re in the same class.”

‘That’ was a roll of film used for taking photographs, from the top selling brand. Small enough to fit in your hand. Alongside the brand name, which resembled that familiar cylindrical shape, the katakana for “Takeshima Tsutako” were written in magic marker. Things found around school were usually taken straight to the lost property office, but there was no reason to do that with this item.

“It’s got your name written on it,” Yumi said as she pressed the roll of film into Tsutako-san’s hand. Some time ago Yumi had gone through the

experience of having her umbrella stolen, go missing and then be returned to her by virtue of having her name written on it.

“But this isn’t mine.”

Tsutako-san looked at the roll of film sitting atop her hand with a confounded expression.

“Huh?”

“For starters, this isn’t my handwriting, and I’m not missing any rolls of film either.”

Yumi thought, “Well that’s just foolish.” She’d agreed to return it, brimming with confidence, because she’d been under the impression that it was Tsutako-san’s.

“So, this Takeshima Tsutako is – ”

Probably someone else with the same name. Of course, ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ was written in katakana, not kanji, so it didn’t conclusively point to this Takeshima Tsutako.⁴

There’s a level of uncertainty introduced by using katakana rather than kanji, because multiple kanji can be represented with the same katakana.

“I wonder if there’s anyone else in school with that name.”

Perhaps using different kanji characters, or maybe even the same ones that Tsutako-san herself uses.⁵ At any rate, Takeshima Tsutako didn’t seem like it would be that common a name.

In the original, Yumi provides two examples of alternate names that would be read as Takeshima Tsutako: 竹島津田子 and 竹島ツタ子, as well as Tsutako’s 武島蔦子

They both crossed their arms and looked at the roll of film, wondering what to do about it.

“Oh, why the look of concentration?”

A new visitor had appeared. Although it's probably more accurate to call her a tenant rather than a visitor. It was Rosa Foetida en bouton, Shimazu Yoshino-san. She'd been in the chrysanthemum group classroom, discussing with Tanuma Chisato-san the particulars of their upcoming date, and had just stopped in at the Rose Mansion on her way home. When Yoshino-san found her two classmates deep in thought, instead of the empty room she had expected, it had apparently been interesting enough that she just had to stick her nose in.

“Whenever you're in trouble, you can count on the great detective Yoshino —”

“ ... ”

Tsutako-san and Yumi looked at each other and surreptitiously sighed. Yumi had the feeling that they were now more likely to thrash around than come to a conclusion. Sadly, Yoshino-san was the most obstinate person in the Rose Mansion. Putting it bluntly, it was obvious that things were about to get worse.

“I've got it.”

Yoshino-san nodded, holding her right hand out, palm upright, with her arm bent at the elbow. Perhaps she'd intended it to look as though she was holding a brandy glass, but, if so, she wasn't swirling it around. A fair bit of time had passed before Yumi realized it was somehow meant to look as though she was holding a pipe. Yoshino-san was apparently going for the Sherlock Holmes look.

“The criminal wrote Takeshima Tsutako on it so that it would be delivered to Tsutako-san, no?”

“Delivered to her?”

Again, something absurd. Plus, ‘criminal’?

“Right. Delivered to Tsutako-san.”

What Yoshino-san had just said was apparently a trick used in detective novels. To have a letter delivered to a certain person in a few days (for example, if you knew you were going to die soon) then you could send a letter with that person’s name and address as the sender, and a non-existent address as the recipient. Letters that can’t be delivered are generally returned to the sender, so while it would take longer than usual it would still be delivered fairly reliably.

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

As soon as the question was out of Yumi’s mouth, Yoshino-san shrugged her shoulder slightly and sighed in exasperation.

“Like – I – said, it’s a trick used in detective novels. It’s fictional. Everyone knows you can’t do that kind of thing in real life.”

Detective novels weren’t the sort of thing to read if you were going to start talking about the legality or morality of things, it seemed. That’s probably true. Having refuted her friend, Yoshino-san looked pleased and triumphant.

“So, then, that would make the intended recipient Takeshima Tsutako.”

With her name written on it, it would undoubtedly be delivered to Tsutako-san after some time had passed. Made sense. But still.

“From who? And why?”

“Well, I don’t know that.”

The great detective didn’t know.

“You know. If someone wanted to deliver this to me, wouldn’t it be easier just to put it in my shoe box on the day they wanted me to get it?”

Tsutako-san pointed out.

“That’s true.”

Yumi thought that seemed more realistic. Not only would it remove the time it took for the lost property office to contact Tsutako-san, but it would also make the intention obvious.

“So? What’s inside?”

“Don’t know.”

They wouldn’t be able to tell that until the film was developed. Tsutako-san may be called Camera-chan, but there’s no way she’d be able to tell what photos were inside just by looking at the casing.

“Let me have a look at it.”

Yoshino-san held out her hand. Tsutako-san took a step backwards, protecting the film. Why? Because she had no idea what Yoshino-san was planning to do if she got her hands on it.

“Hey ... !”

Yoshino-san desperately lunged forward but didn’t come away with the prize, instead losing her balance and grabbing on to the table with both hands to stabilize herself.

“Stop it. What do you think I’m going to – ”

Yoshino-san moaned as she straightened herself up, but then caught sight of something and suddenly fell silent.

“This is ... ”

She picked up one of the photos spread across the table and looked at it, eyes narrowed.

“This is Eriko-sama.”

Yoshino-san looked to Tsutako-san for confirmation.

“You can tell, even though she’s wearing street clothes?”

It wasn’t a straight “yes,” but the answer was undoubtedly in the affirmative.

“Of course. We’re eternal rivals.”

It was probably taken during the New Year’s period because there were numerous people wearing kimonos. In amongst that crowd, Yoshino-san’s onee-sama’s onee-sama, Torii Eriko-sama, was smiling at the camera.

“Even now, we’re still tightly bound through Rei-chan.”

Yoshino-san said, her eyes quiet and serene as she looked at the photograph of her “eternal rival.”

The Yellow Thread



The systems of the world run surprisingly smoothly.

For instance, you're pushed into high-school just as middle-school is starting to get boring.

And at high-school, there's the so-called soeur system waiting, in which you pretend that a complete stranger of an upperclasswoman is your older sister. Which is amusing enough, but after a year of following your pseudo-sister suddenly it's your turn to be the older sister, which presents a new opportunity for amusement.

"And so? Despite being in the opposite direction from your house, you came all the way to the main gate hunting for a new toy, right Eriko?"

Having just arrived at school, and laughing as she yawned, was Eriko's insufferable but inseparable friend. Her name was Satou Sei.

"Such a bother so early in the morning."

"A bother? This is fun."

Eriko laughed too. She walked alongside Sei down the path lined with ginkgo trees. Watching the first-years as they arrived at school had ended for today. She'd be late for morning prayers if she didn't start heading towards class soon.

It was nearing the end of April. The weak sunlight and the pleasant breeze were just perfect. It made her want to ignore the classroom and continue walking alongside her friend forever.

"If Eriko's going all out, she's probably going to win after all."

Sei said, apparently talking to herself.

“Win what?”

“It seems the Roses are having a bet. Who will find a petit soeur first, Eriko or Youko.”

“Myself and Youko? Why weren’t you included?”

Eriko tilted her head. Since Sei was also a bouton, she should have been in the running too.

“No-one backed this particular horse, so it’s been excluded from the race.”

Sei smiled, self-deprecatingly, but it was true that she lacked direction. She liked to drift around, light and fluffy like a jellyfish.

“So? What kind of girl do you like, Eriko? Ahh, wait, don’t tell me. I can guess.”

Sei held up her hand in front of Eriko’s mouth.

“Someone you won’t get bored of within two years, right?”

“Exactly. Just what I’d expect from someone who’s known me for so long.”

Since kindergarten, in fact, which would make it over ten years.

“But even if someone does catch your eye, you’d still have to evaluate them during school, I guess. So it looks like Youko will be first then.”

“Hey, stop trying to get in on their bet too.”

“Oh, come on.”

Just as Eriko was grabbing her coldly laughing friend’s hand, a tall student ran past them.

“Ooh. There’s a good one.”

” – Looks like it.”

Eriko watched that disappearing figure fondly. It was obvious from the brand-new school uniform and the uncertain manner of her tie’s knot that she was a new student.

So as not to disturb the pleats in their skirts. So as not to toss their white sailor scarves into disarray.

Eriko could call out and scold her about it, but didn’t. That girl wasn’t the only one who was running. The first-years’ classrooms were a bit further from the entrance than the older students’ so she had to hurry.

On arrival at the statue of Maria-sama they found that tall first-year still standing there, praying.

On closer inspection, she looked like a boy. Very short hair and a slender figure. A sharp face with few soft features. It was only because she was wearing a skirt that you could tell she was a girl.

“What on earth could she be praying for?”

Sei smiled, even though it was something they did every day.

Indeed, that boyish girl had been standing there praying for quite some time. Even though some other first-years had stopped and prayed for only a few seconds before thundering off, probably worried about being late. Just as Eriko was starting to wonder if she was alright, she opened her eyes and took off running again.

It was then that Eriko saw it. Extending from her fingertip, a single shining thread of yellow.

* *

It was probably a spiderweb or something similar. – Eriko smiled as she remembered the scene from earlier that day. It would be different if it were a red string, that unseen thread that was said to join fated lovers, but this was a yellow one.

From the mouth of the teapot rose steam heavy with the fruity scent of the black tea.

“What’s this? You’re spacing out about something, or are you reminiscing?”

“Nothing of the sort.”

Eriko turned around and responded to the question that came from behind her.

School had finished for the day. The only two people in the student council building, the so-called Rose Mansion, were Eriko and her onee-sama, Rosa Foetida. Youko would probably show up soon, panting, but never late. Following that would be Youko’s onee-sama, Rosa Chinensis, and Sei’s onee-sama, Rosa Gigantea. As for Sei – who could tell; sometimes she’d show up for meetings and sometimes she wouldn’t.

“Oh. You say it’s nothing, but your expression tells a different story.”

“Well I was just pouring the tea, and had come straight here after cleaning the classroom, so I was smiling thinking that this would be over soon.”

There was no way to adequately explain the truth so Eriko substituted something appropriate.

“But you never look like you’re doing it grudgingly, Eriko.”

“Yeah. I find these odd jobs kind of fun. At home I’m coddled, so it’s a fresh experience.”

“So? Have you found someone you want to take as your petit soeur?”

Rosa Foetida asked, studying her face.

“Unfortunately, no.”

Eriko’s lips curled into a smile as she placed the cups of tea on the table.

She didn’t think it was worth mentioning the first-year that she had seen that morning. It was just a passing fancy, nothing more.

“Then what did you mean when you said it’d be over soon?”

“I meant in general. First semester’s generally the time to take a petit soeur.”

“A petit soeur isn’t going to jump into your arms while you’re spacing out, you know.”

“True. But if Youko or Sei find a petit soeur, then I’d be free of this too, right?”

This response earned Eriko a, “Hey,” and a tap on the head with a notebook.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call those remaining ‘small-fry’, but if you take too long trying to land one then you’ll find all the good ones have been caught.”

“I know that.”

This time around the notebook used to hit Eriko on the head was thrown towards her chest.

“What’s this?”

She asked, catching it. Rosa Foetida responded with:

“A list of eligible first-years.”

“And I have to choose from one of these?”

“Not at all. Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Gigantea and I wrote it the other day for a bit of fun. It’s a list of first-years that we’d pick if we were second-years.”

“... You must have plenty of free time.”

“Whatever. You can use it as a reference, if you’d like.”

“And Youko?”

“She hasn’t seen it yet. I beat Rosa Chinensis at scissors-paper-rock.”

“I might not pay any attention to what you’ve written.”

“I know that. But still, you’re intrigued, aren’t you.”

“I suppose so.”

Eriko was indeed interested, because after a flip through the book she said, “I’ll borrow this,” and put it in her bag.

She could hear the sounds of somebody, probably Youko, running up the stairs.

* * *

Thinking back, she’d long had a weakness for rarities.

Whenever she was wondering what to do, just before she frankly asked herself, “Which one of these would be best?” she’d instinctively reach out for the item of which there was only one of at that place.

If, for instance, the choice was being made because a visitor had brought a selection of cakes then there was no problem, because there would be none left afterward anyway.

But with things like clothes and shoes, the residual effects were bothersome. Countless times she’d returned home only to find that the clothes she’d bought didn’t suit her at all. Or like that time when she’d been depressed for a couple of days after she found out that another girl in the neighborhood had the exact same item, despite it being the only one in the

store when she bought it. That was the first time she realized there was a possibility that a store might only have one of an item in stock because it was really popular and almost sold-out. That particular item of clothing had been shoved deep into her closet, never to be worn.

It was a moral lesson. Just because something had a different appearance didn't mean she should leap at it. Better to ignore the superficial attractions.

Eriko tried to persuade herself of this as she continued on from yesterday, standing beside the school gate and watching students arrive.

You can't judge people based on their appearance. – It was as though that saying was coined just for her current predicament.

Nonetheless, when that boyish looking first-year from yesterday appeared, Eriko left her position and tottered after her. It was much earlier than when she had met Sei yesterday. The first-year wasn't running today.

Eriko followed her, leaving a gap of about ten metres between them. That girl prayed in front of the statue of Maria-sama for just a bit shorter length of time than yesterday.

Even though she knew it was foolish, Eriko stared at that girl's fingertips. But, unfortunately, the thread that she saw yesterday morning was nowhere to be seen.

Well, what had she been expecting? Eriko let out a sigh as she watched the first-year walk away. Then, as a matter of course, she prayed to Maria-sama before walking across to the school building.

She didn't feel like evaluating any more first-years that morning.

She had to collect herself.

Later that day, after finishing her lunch in the classroom, Eriko headed towards the school library carrying the notebook she had borrowed from her onee-sama. The notebook containing the list of eligible first-years.

She hadn't really felt like reading it last night at home, so it had remained in her school bag.

It had popped into her head just as she was thinking that she had to calm down, but obviously there was no way she could take it out in the classroom. It would be a major drama if one of her inquisitive classmates asked, "What's that?" On the other hand, going to the Rose Mansion was also out of the question, since one of the Roses might show up.

But in the library no-one would pay any attention to someone sitting in the reading room with a notebook open. It was a space used for writing reports, doing homework and studying for exams, both during the lunch break and after school. No-one there had time to worry about what anyone else was doing.

The only seat that was free was adjacent to an aisle, so Eriko sat down and switched on the reading light. On the other side of the aisle was a bookshelf, so people would occasionally wander past. This was a bit concerning, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"Well then."

Upon opening the notebook Eriko found a listing of about twenty girls. Each page covered a single person, listing their class and club activities. There wasn't a photograph, but to compensate for this they had listed any obvious physical characteristics, such as long hair, short stature, or a mole on their cheek.

The amount of information in each girl's profile varied too – some went as far as listing their best subjects and favorite foods, while other profiles only contained a name and a class. She scratched her head in confusion about why the Roses had put some of the girls in this list of favorites.

Included was one profile where Eriko just had to read the girl's name and her face immediately sprung to mind. But that was only because the girl was somewhat of a celebrity, not because Eriko held any special kind of affection for her.

She flipped through the notebook, looking over each profile in turn, then closed it. That one particular first-year was not included in the list.

Eriko didn't actually know that girl's name. But if she had been in the list then one of the profiles would have mentioned 'boyish looks' as a characteristic.

"I thought as much."

Eriko muttered softly, then quickly closed her mouth. The student in the next cubicle, probably a third-year, looked up from her giant reference book and shot her a warning glance.

(Oh brother.)

Students studying for exams were such an annoyance. She decided to move elsewhere, so as not to be even more of a bother, turned off the overhead light, and was just getting up from her chair when she cried out again.

"Erk."

This time around, her neighbor looked at her with a blatantly annoyed look on her face, but Eriko didn't notice. Her eyes were fixed on the student that had, just at that moment, entered into the aisle adjacent to her cubicle.

(It's her ... !)

Eriko had only just stood up, but she parked her butt down in the seat again.

(Why is she here?)

Her heart was racing.

That girl was a high-school student, after all, so there was nothing strange about her being here, inside the high-school library at lunch time. But the timing was just too convenient. That was what had surprised Eriko, and was probably why her lingering heart palpitations wouldn't stop.

Even though she knew she had done nothing wrong, Eriko re-opened the notebook and used it to cover her face from her nose down. Everything above that, in other words her eyes, needed to be left uncovered so that she could track that girl.

Unaware that she was being watched, the boyish first-year walked calmly from bookshelf to bookshelf. It was obvious she wasn't just browsing aimlessly because from time to time she'd stop and remove one or two books from the shelves. After completing a fairly lengthy circuit, that girl ended up clasping a stack of about ten books to her chest.

(Cooking book, historical novel, teen girl's novel, athletics manual ...)

Eriko frowned, noticing the incongruity of her choices. She couldn't read the titles but it was easy enough to deduce the genres based on where that girl had been standing when she'd picked up a book.

(On top of that, ten books. That's got to be a joke. Will she head straight for the loan counter?)

Eriko watched fondly as that girl easily carried the mountain of books and did exactly what her internal commentary suggested, even though students weren't allowed to borrow that many books at a time.

As expected, that girl didn't make it past the loan counter without incident. After exchanging a few words with the student library attendant that girl turned back, carrying about half the books.

(I knew she'd get shot down.)

Eriko was unable to tell what that girl's selection criteria was, but after returning some of the books to the shelves she completed the check-out procedure and left the reading room carrying five books.

This time around Eriko stood up and actually left her seat. The student beside her gave a theatrical sigh of relief, but that wasn't worth dignifying with a response.

“I can’t believe she did that, even though it says right here in big letters –
“Five books per person.””

Luckily, the library attendant was an acquaintance of Eriko’s, so she struck up a conversation, pretending to gossip.

“Ahh, you mean that first-year just before?”

The library attendant laughed, saying, “You saw that, huh?”

“Well, she said she was borrowing them using somebody else’s student card, but I had to refuse anyway.”

“Someone else’s card?”

“Apparently they were for a sick friend who was absent today. But it still would have been against the rules.”

“A sick friend... ”

If she hadn’t been refused then that girl would probably have taken those five books to her sick friend’s place after school. It made sense that only a neighbor would trust someone enough to give them their student card and ask them to do this.

“But if she was telling the truth, wouldn’t it be okay to put five books on each card? After all, if the card’s owner had been well, they would have been able to borrow the books themselves, right?”

Eriko inquired, but the library attendant responded immediately with, “That wouldn’t have been possible.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me you know the names and faces of every student at Lillian’s?”

“Not even close. Well, it was a nice try, but the sick girl would never have been able to pull it off.”

Before Eriko had a chance to ask why, the library attendant continued.

“After all, it’s easy enough to check that someone’s wearing the right uniform.”

“Huh?”

“You see, the sick friend’s student card was for a middle-schooler.”

* * * *

Interesting.

No, scratch that, profoundly intriguing.

Numerous mysteries had arisen from just a short period of observation.

The more mysteries people presented, the more she wanted to get to know them.

What kind of a person were they really? What were they hiding, beneath the surface?

It would be a shame if all of this information were revealed immediately. So, even though the library attendant probably knew that girl’s name, she didn’t ask.

Eriko placed a high value on discretion. She didn’t want that girl to find out that she was interested in her through some third party. Nor did she want some meddlesome friend of hers to impertinently create a complete profile of that girl.

She was convinced that one day, perhaps far in the future, she would come to know everything about that girl. That slow, natural progression was how she wanted to get to know her.

So, when Eriko returned the notebook to her onee-sama, Rosa Foetida, all she said was that there was a first-year she was interested in, and that her onee-sama would get a chance to see this girl soon. Her onee-sama asked

for the girl's name and class, but Eriko merely smiled and dodged the questions. After all, there was no way she could respond since she didn't know the answer.

The next time Eriko saw that boyish looking first-year, she was running again.

School had finished for the day and Eriko was walking away from the school buildings, following her usual route home, when she saw a student running towards her with incredible speed. The reason Eriko didn't realize it was that girl right away was probably because she wasn't wearing her school uniform. It was just as they passed each other, when Eriko focused on the figure and not the clothing, that she realized it was her.

Even without the face-guard, the distinctive uniform she was wearing obviously belonged to the school's kendo club. Nonetheless, she'd left in such a hurry that she hadn't had time to remove the chest or groin protectors. The intense look of distress on her face didn't seem to be caused entirely by the strain of sprinting flat-out while carrying such a heavy load.

(I wonder what happened.)

After she ran past, Eriko turned to follow her progress and try and figure out where she was going. But all she could determine was that that girl wasn't heading towards the classrooms. Chasing after someone and spying on them was contrary to her policy, so she let the matter drop.

Eriko walked on, past the greenhouse and was nearing the martial arts building when a student wearing a middle-school uniform emerged from inside.

"Thanks for your help."

The teacher in charge of the kendo club called out and the middle-school student responded by quickly bowing then turning and running back towards the school too. There was no evidence to prove this, but Eriko surmised that this middle-school student had come here bearing some news

which had caused that boyish looking girl to interrupt her club activities and run off somewhere.

Except there was no need to refer to her by the lengthy designation of “that boyish looking girl” any longer. Eriko had spotted her name, clearly written on her groin protector.

That girl’s surname was Hasekura.

* * * * *

Eriko moved fast after that.

“Hasekura from the kendo club. Onee-sama, I’d like you to see her.”

“Hasekura?”

Apparently her onee-sama couldn’t instantly recall all the first-years not on the list just by surname.

“Does this Hasekura-san know that you want to be her soeur?”

“No.”

After hearing this response Rosa Foetida stopped to ponder for a moment before agreeing.

“Okay. How about we go to the martial arts building the next time the kendo club has a practice session.”

“Thank-you very much.”

“It’s a bit early to be giving thanks.”

Rosa Foetida said, with a complex look on her face.

“Since you haven’t discussed this with her, she might already be taken by a second-year in the kendo club, don’t you think?”

But her onee-sama’s concerns were misplaced.

While watching the kendo club’s practice, they learned from the club president that Hasekura’s grades were excellent and she had a great personality. But she was so good at kendo that she made all the second-years nervous, so none of them had declared an intention to become her onee-sama.

“Moreover, she’s – ”

The club president started, but then shook her head and said, “Nevermind.”

“I don’t want to prejudice your opinion. If you’ve got your eye on her, then make sure you take a good, hard look. Prudence is how you avoid buying the wrong thing.”

Her onee-sama questioned the club president’s suggestive remark, asking, “What do you mean?” In contrast, Eriko felt a chill run down her spine.

There was little doubt that Hasekura’s secret was somehow connected to the middle-school.

* * * * *

Taking place in the middle of May, the Yamayurikai organized Freshman Welcoming Ceremony played an important role in integrating the first-years with the rest of the student body.

The three Roses – Red, White and Yellow – placed a small medallion engraved with the image of Maria-sama around the neck of each and every first-year.

“May the Virgin Mary bless you and watch over you.”

Eriko and her fellow boutons (the petit soeurs of the Roses) stood beside their onee-samas, acting as assistants. Even Sei, who usually skipped their meetings, was fulfilling her duty as a bouton today.

Eriko learned which class Hasekura was in when she saw her standing in the middle of the line of students from the first-year chrysanthemum class.

Even though she wasn't usually religious, Eriko felt as though Maria-sama were tapping her on the shoulder and saying that it was almost time.

After the conclusion of the Freshmen Welcoming Ceremony, Eriko made her way towards the first-year chrysanthemum class.

Since she didn't yet have a petit soeur, she was still the lowest ranked member of the Yellow Rose family, despite being a second-year. Therefore, she would normally take the initiative and offer to help clean up, but on this occasion she was given a reprieve.

"It's okay Eriko, I'll do your part."

Her onee-sama smiled. She seemed to have a fair idea of what was going to happen next.

"Youko, you can go too."

Rosa Chinensis announced. Youko bowed, then headed towards the chapel exit while the others were still tidying up.

"Well then, me too."

Since the other two second-years were leaving, Sei tried to escape too, but Rosa Gigantea grabbed her by the sailor collar and said, "Not you."

"Why am I the only one that has to stay?"

Walking alongside Youko, Eriko heard Sei's protest. Eriko had been so absorbed in her own situation that she hadn't had time to think about anyone else, but it looked like Youko was in the same position as herself.

The profile of her friend's face was dignified and beautiful.

The first-year chrysanthemum classroom was buzzing with students preparing to head home.

“Can you call Hasekura-san over?”

Eriko seized upon the class member closest to the door and before long Hasekura-san appeared at the doorway, looking puzzled. It looked like she had absolutely no idea why she had been called over.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Rosa Foetida en bouton ... ”

It looks like Hasekura had remembered Eriko's face from the ceremony just before, when she'd been standing beside Rosa Foetida.

“But this isn't the first time you've seen me, is it?”

Eriko had taken a few steps out into the corridor and turned around. Hasekura, who had been following her, nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I'm not sure when it was, but I saw you at one of the kendo club practices.”

“I see. I'm glad you remembered me.”

“Mmm.”

At this point, Hasekura was probably thinking that Eriko hadn't come here just so she could listen to some fawning yes-man.

“I'll be blunt. Will you be my petit soeur?”

“Huh?”

Hasekura's reaction to this sudden proposal was one of complete shock. Eriko was eminently satisfied with this.

There was no need to choose a special place for the soeur ceremony. After all, the value was in the act itself.

Therefore, performing the ceremony in a commonplace location like the corner of a hallway held a certain appeal to Eriko. That was probably one of the main reasons why she had decided to spring this on Hasekura without giving her a chance to prepare herself. And if Eriko had asked her to meet in front of the statue of Maria-sama, then even the most thick-headed first-year would start to wonder about the possibilities.

“What's the matter?”

When pressed for an answer, Hasekura voiced her confusion.

“Umm ... I think there's been some kind of mistake.”





“Oh? Are there two first-year members of the kendo club called Hasekura? Or do you already have an onee-sama?”

“No.”

Hasekura shook her head, refuting both those suggestions. Eriko nodded at this.

If Hasekura were already someone else’s petit soeur, then Eriko would have been forced to back off. But she believed that any other obstacle could be surmounted.

“If I became the petit soeur of Rosa Foetida en bouton then I’d have to work for the Yamayurikai, right?”

Hasekura cautiously sought confirmation.

“Pretty much. It’d be great if you could help out.”

“But I’ve got my club activities.”

“I know. Whatever you can manage will be fine.”

“That’s not all.”

“Middle-school?”

Eriko took a stab in the dark.

“... You know about that?”

“No. I don’t know. Which is why I want you to tell me what the problem is.”

Hasekura nodded at this. Apparently she’d decided that Eriko deserved to know.

“I have a cousin in the third-year of middle-school who has a frail body. Whenever I hear that she’s unwell, I rush over to her.”

“I see. Even if you’re in the middle of club practice.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, just talking to myself. Anything else?”

Eriko gestured for her to continue.

“Umm. So, you see, I don’t really have a lot of spare time to help out with –”

“I told you, whatever you can manage will be fine.”

“And I’ve already decided to make my cousin my petit soeur. There’s no way she’d be able to do student council work.”

“I’m not asking you, let alone your petit soeur, just so I have cheap labor.”

Eriko said flatly.

She wasn’t concerned about what might happen in a year’s time. What interested her more were the feelings of the person right in front of her.

Are you interested in being a petit soeur or not? One or the other.

“But, why me?”

Hasekura muttered, appearing to be on the verge of tears.

“Why choose you? Let’s see. There’s still a lot I don’t know about you, but from what I can see I think we’d have fun together.”

“Fun?”

Hasekura repeated, as though she’d just heard some unfathomable word.

“That’s right.”

Eriko laughed.

“Well, what do you think? Want to try imagining what your school life would be like with me?”

Setting everything about club activities and cousins aside for now.

All of that was just noise. For two people to become onee-sama and petit soeur, all that was needed was for them to have an affinity with each other. Nothing else mattered.

“... It does sound like that would be fun.”

Eventually, Hasekura smiled.

She looked as though she was expecting a flood of doubts to come rushing into her head at any moment. But she’d resolutely taken a step forward into this new world and was determined to take it all in. That was what her expression conveyed.

“So I’ll take that as a yes then?”

Eriko asked in confirmation, and got back a clear, “Yes.”

As proof of their vow, Eriko removed the rosary that hung around her neck and placed it around the neck of the first-year.

“So, what am I supposed to do as a petit soeur ... ?”

The young girl, having just become a petit soeur, looked down awkwardly.

“Let’s see ..., well, I suppose there’s something you should tell me from the outset.”

Eriko asked, having just become an onee-sama.

“What’s your first name?”

“Uh.”

Eriko’s petit soeur, formerly known as Hasekura, was momentarily rendered speechless but then laughed as she traced a figure in the air with the index finger of her right hand.

“Rei.”

A shining thread of yellow extended from her fingertip as she wrote her name in the air. Eriko held out her own finger, gently winding in that yellow thread.

It was probably a trick of the light, caused by the setting sun shining through the window.

Frame of Mind 5

“But enough about that, the film, the film.”

Yoshino-san launched a surprise attack and took the film from Tsutako-san. Well, it may be impolite, but ‘stole’ would be a more fitting description.

“If we have a look inside, we’ll crack this case immediately. The criminal’s dying message is undoubtedly in here.”

“Aaah – !”

While Yoshino-san was talking, Yumi and Tsutako-san worked together to relieve her of the film. There was a time and place to joke about criminals and dying messages, but now was not that time. Yumi grabbed Yoshino-san’s arms and held them behind her back, while Tsutako-san deftly caught the film that she dropped.

“Two on one, that’s unfair.”

Yoshino-san grumbled as she freed herself from Yumi’s grasp.

“Unfair, huh.”

What’s that, great detective? Just what were you planning to do? But now the mask of the great detective had been cast aside and the samurai warrior’s features shone through.

“You can’t expose undeveloped film to light.”

Tsutako-san said, as though she were chiding a pre-schooler.

“Oh, well of course I knew that.”

Yoshino-san laughed it off, but it was hard to tell if that was the truth or not.

“But still. If you got that developed, you’d be able to tell whose it was, right?”

“I would, but I can’t do that.”

“Can’t you just pretend that it’s yours and get it developed? You could just say that you got it developed because you thought it was yours after some first-year gave it to you. No-one’s at fault then.”

“But it’s not mine.”

“You’re such a stiff, Tsutako-san.”

“And you’re way too loose, Yoshino-san.”

So in the end, Yoshino-san had merely caused a commotion and hadn’t provided them with any constructive input, leaving them back at the beginning. Yumi folded her arms and thought about what they should do.

“It has to go to lost property.”

Tsutako-san said.

“That seems best.”

Yumi concurred. Rather than continuing to sit around, look at each other and wonder what to do it would be better to let a specialist (official) handle this. Sure, they were interested in finding out what was inside and who it belonged to, but that wasn’t strictly necessary. Yumi volunteered to take it to the lost property office tomorrow. Then Tsutako-san said that she’d accompany her.

“If I don’t go and explain what happened, it’ll just end up coming back to me.”

Tsutako-san said. After all, it had ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ clearly written on it, so they’d obviously think it was hers. The name must be that of the owner, right?

“Sorry.”

Yumi bowed her head, apologizing for saddling Tsutako-san with this burden.

“It’s okay. It all started with those kind first-years anyway.”

Right at that moment, Toudou Shimako-san entered the room.

“Sorry I’m late. I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

She had a worn-out expression on her face.

“No, we weren’t waiting ... as such.”

“Huh? Oh, darn.”

It looked like Shimako-san had forgotten that they didn’t have a meeting scheduled for today.

“That would explain why Noriko isn’t here.”

Rosa Gigantea gave an embarrassed smile as she put her bag down. She looked completely exhausted.

“Were you meeting with that first-year?”

Yoshino-san inquired and Shimako-san responded in the affirmative. ‘That first-year’ was the winner of the Valentine’s Day treasure hunt. Although she (from memory, her name was Igawa Ami-san) hadn’t been able to participate on the day, she entered the white card’s hiding spot in the absentee’s draw and, as a result, won the prize of a date with Shimako-san. Igawa Ami-san proved to be a bit of an eccentric character, saying that she didn’t want to be seen with Shimako-san. This must have caused all sorts of problems in their discussions about the date.

“Dealing with first-years is much harder than I thought. It’s so much easier with Noriko.”

Unusually, Shimako-san was complaining. Still, Shimako-san and her petit soeur Noriko-chan were 100% compatible with each other and got along incredibly well. So if Noriko-chan was used as the basis of comparison then the vast majority of first-years would be labeled as troublemakers.

“That’s true. For a second-year, thoughts aren’t vocalized as much, instead they’re expressed through a change in behavior.”

Tsutako-san said, as though she were speaking to herself.

“Say what?”

The trio of future Roses took notice of this seemingly profound utterance. It was unusual for Shimako-san to grumble, but this sort of thing was unheard of from Tsutako-san.

Yumi was wondering if something had happened with Shouko-chan, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Tsutako-san soon followed up on her earlier statement, apparently feeling she was being misunderstood:

“I’m not talking about myself.”

Then, as the conversation continued around her, Tsutako-san returned to work, sorting through the photographs. She picked up a new envelope, then set it off to the side without opening it.

“What’s this?”

“Checking those would be a waste of time.”

Covering the entire front of the envelope was the word ‘Unpublishable.’ These were photos that, for one reason or another, couldn’t be shown to other people.

“But why?”

Shimako-san curiously inquired.

“I thought you destroyed even the negatives if the subject didn’t like them.”

“Ahh, that’s right.”

Yumi nodded in agreement. It was supposedly part of Tsutako-san’s moral code that no traces would remain on earth in those situations.

“The subjects were happy with them, and I have permission to keep them. But even so, they can’t be displayed.”

“Oh, are they nude photos or something?”

Yoshino-san joked. Tsutako-san responded seriously with, “In a sense.”

Her smiling profile indicated that they were all brilliant photographs and that Tsutako-san probably felt a sense of regret about not being able to show them. The other girls also felt a similar sense of regret about not getting to see those photographs.

The Awkward Princess

“I’m off.”

I flew out of the classroom as soon as the fourth period class had ended.

“Ah. Hiromi-san, where are you going?”

“There’s some stuff I’ve got to do. I’ll skip lunch.”

“Wait, I have no idea why you’re in such a hurry, but at least put your seat back in its proper position.”

My classmate grumbled. I heard her, but didn’t turn back. Right. Like she said, currently I was in a hurry.

The only time I slowed down was when I passed one of the older teachers. But I don’t think I was able to stop my ragged breathing. This morning, when I woke up and looked out the window, I was struck by a brilliant idea. What would her expression be when I told her?

“Oh, pardon me.”

Turning the corner out of the corridor, I barely managed to avoid running into Takeshima Tsutako-san from the second-year pine class.

“No, it’s my fault.”

Not watching where I was going while breaking the speed limit. It’s quite obvious who was at fault here, but that’s the standard greeting when you suddenly come to a halt. I knew Tsutako-san from back in first-year, when we’d both been in the same class.

“Oh, you’re off to have lunch somewhere?”

Tsutako-san asked, noticing the lunchbox I was carrying.

“Ahh, yeah.”

In return, I dropped my gaze to look at what Tsutako-san held in her hands and, as usual, she was holding a compact camera. Tsutako-san was the self-styled ‘Photography Club Ace’ so she carried a camera everywhere, as though it were attached to her body.

“The weather’s nice today.”

Thinking that things could get problematic if the conversation went on for too long, I looked towards the first-year classrooms. At that precise moment, the flash went off.

“Kya.”

I instinctively looked down, but Tsutako-san said:

“Sorry. But you had a nice look on your face.”

“A nice look?”

That was unusual, so I questioned it. It was the first time that anyone had ever taken a surprise photo of me like that. Naturally, I’d had my photo taken countless times before now. Most of the time, it was because I requested it. There were times when I’d unknowingly had my photo taken, but that was usually when I was chatting with a group of people – and in those cases it wouldn’t matter if it was me or somebody else in the photo.

“I can bring a copy around to your classroom if you’d like ... Umm.”

“It’s wisteria group.”

“Ah, right, right, wisteria group. The same one as Shimako-san.”

After that Tsutako-san continued the general flow of the conversation and inquired about how things were with Toudou Shimako-san. I wasn’t particularly interested in that, so I merely responded with, “Same as ever.”

“Okay. Well, sorry for keeping you. I’ll bring the photos around sometime soon.”

“Ah, Tsutako-san.”

“Yes?”

Tsutako-san was walking away when I called out to her, and she slowly turned to face me.

“Sometime soon I may ask you to take some photos for me.”

“Oh my. Something’s about to happen, huh.”

“Is that okay?”

“Of course. Just let me know when.”

My former classmate said, then left. I waved her goodbye, then resumed jogging down the hallway.

I moved with a spring in my step.

My target was the first-year camellia class. Home of the adorable Mickey.

“Mickey.”

She was surrounded by a couple of classmates so I stood at the door and called out to her directly, not bothering to get someone else in the class to fetch her for me.

“Kan ... no, Hiromi-sama.”

Freeing herself from her classmates and rushing out into the corridor, Mickey was as short and skinny as ever.

“It’s okay, you can still call me Kan-chan.”

“No. Since you’re a year older, it’s only proper that I call you Hiromi-sama.”

“You’re strict.”

As I said this I reached out to touch her tie but she pulled back with her face flushed. Perhaps she was conscious about being in public.

“Things are different to before.”

“Nothing’s changed though.”

In the past, I’d often straighten her hair after it had been messed up by boys who were teasing her. Mickey had been even smaller than now and her fingers weren’t as dexterous, so she’d come crying to me for help. I was the one who’d untangle the string when she got stuck playing cat’s cradle. I was the one who’d open the juice box for her when we went out. And I was the one who’d close the folding umbrella for her.

“So what brings you here today?”

Mickey was looking back inside her classroom. It felt like one of the girls she had been talking to earlier was staring at us.

“Is that your lunch?”

I pointed at the small handbag that was hanging from a strap around her shoulder.

“Huh? ... Yeah.”

“Perfect. Bring that and let’s go.”

“Let’s go? Where to?”

“Just follow me. We’ll eat lunch outside today.”

I grabbed hold of Mickey’s hand and was walking off when I saw that classmate of hers walking over.

“Hold on, Sayuri-san. We’re still in the middle of our conversation.”

She had a stern look on her face. I stopped momentarily, turned to face her and emphatically stated:

“I’m borrowing Mickey for a while.”

As expected, Mickey’s classmate wasn’t about to defy someone older than her and didn’t pursue the matter further. Mickey looked momentarily troubled about being caught between us, but eventually followed me. I was pleased. Taking Mickey out of that stagnant classroom and into the fresh air had been the right decision.

When we reached the courtyard, I asked Mickey a question.

“What did I do?”

“Huh?”

“Your classmate, just before. She looked like she was mad about something.”

At long last, Mickey smiled.

“Masami-san? That’s her normal face.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s how she always looks. So it’s kind of sad that you thought she looked mad.”

This seemed to have tickled her funny bone, as Mickey started to giggle. She then went on to say that she’d been in the same class as Masami-san all throughout middle-school and they were close friends.

“Is that it. I thought you were being bullied again.”

“Not at all. Anyway, why don’t we eat our lunch here? If we don’t hurry, the lunch break will be over.”

I spread out the plastic tarp and Mickey sat down and opened her lunch box.

We were soon joined on the grass by a few more groups of people, all of whom probably had the same idea, and our elegant lunchtime began. It looked like most of the other groups thought this up on the spur of the moment, because we were one of the few to have a tarp. Even so, the other girls didn't give up, spreading about old newspapers and fliers they had acquired from somewhere. I heard a distant voice joke that their white socks would be stained by the newspaper ink.

Peace.

Even without Mickey's earlier refutation, the light and carefree traditions of Lillian's Girls Academy meant that bullying seldom occurred. That was probably why Mickey, often teased at school, had eschewed taking the entrance exam for our local public middle-school in favor of this private one.

Since I had been preparing to protect her during middle-school I was a bit worried when I first heard this, but now I could see that it had been the best choice for Mickey.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to ask her.

"Hey, what did you feel when you saw me at Lillian's?"

"Why do you ask?"

Mickey stopped eating and looked up at me.

"You were so shocked, I didn't ask you at the time."

It was in April, and the cherry blossoms were fluttering down. I spotted Mickey in front of the statue of Maria-sama and called out to her. When she turned around, she looked so surprised that it made me feel ashamed. Like she'd seen a ghost or something.

"Yeah, it really was a big surprise."

Mickey smiled.

“After all, I’d heard nothing from you since my family moved away. I never imagined that you’d be at Lillian’s.”

And then she’d seen someone she hadn’t expected to be there. So to say she’d seen a ghost wouldn’t be entirely incorrect.

“Anything other than surprise?”

I asked, looking straight into her eyes. Then Mickey got a slightly troubled look on her face.

“How to put this, it wasn’t a single emotion. It was like a flood of memories came back to me all at once ... Sorry I can’t explain it any better.”

“That’s okay.”

Because they were her honest feelings. Of course, if she’d said, “I was so happy since I never expected to see you,” then that would have felt good too. But it wasn’t like her to use such sweet words anyway.

“If there’s ever anything bothering you, come and see me. I’ll help you.”

“I couldn’t. I don’t want to cause you any trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just take this as an advance payment.”

I took the last remaining sausage piece from Mickey’s lunch box and popped it into my mouth.

“There’s nothing bothering me.”

Mickey closed her lunchbox, put her chopsticks back in their holder and smiled.

“But when there is, talk to me.”

“Yeah. When there is.”

Ten minutes before the start of the fifth period, I rolled up the plastic tarp and escorted Mickey back to her first-year camellia group classroom.

* * *

Two days later, I heard Mickey's name spoken by someone completely unexpected.

"Hiromi-san. Ahh, about that first-year student you're often with."

Toudou Shimako-san called out to me just as I was about to head home for the day.

"You mean Mickey?"

"Mickey ... ? Ahh, yes. Her name is indeed Miike-san. Is she your petit soeur?"

"We're not soeurs."

I mentally added, "For now, anyway," then challenged Shimako-san.

"Why do you ask?"

Petit soeur.

The question itself wasn't that unusual.

Whenever I'd walk alongside Mickey, my classmates would innocently pepper us with that question.

And every time we were asked, I'd deny it by saying, "We're not soeurs," just like I had done with Shimako-san. I felt that we would become soeurs at some point, but I hadn't yet presented her with a rosary.

It had only been a month since the school opening ceremony. There was no rush. That's what I thought.

The reason I followed up the, “We’re not soeurs,” response with a, “Why?” was probably because Shimako-san had been the one asking.

Shimako-san came across as fairly aloof, someone who wasn’t interested in the high-school equivalent of celebrity gossip – which two students had become soeurs, or which soeurs were currently quarreling, that kind of thing.

“There’s something I’m a bit worried about. Although I don’t mean to intrude.”

Shimako-san said, haltingly. She prefaced what came next by saying this was something she’d heard from a first-year whose acquaintance she’d recently made.

“Two days ago, Miike Sayuri-san ate lunch outside accompanied by an older student. Were you the one who invited her, Hiromi-san?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“After that ... Sayuri-san was late for her fifth-period class. Were you aware of that?”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“That’s not true. I walked her back to her classroom. Then I made it back to class before the bell rang for the start of lesson.”

I smiled, rebuffing the foolish accusation. But Shimako-san silenced me with a glance.

“The class she was late for was PE.”

“Huh?”

“So even if she was back at her classroom before the bell rang, she may not have made it to class on time.”

“No way.”

I felt my legs starting to give way and reached out for the nearest desk. I couldn't say whether all the blood rushed to my head, or I'd gone pale. My mind went completely blank.

“Why didn't she tell me?”

I mumbled. The question wasn't aimed at anyone in particular, but from beside me Shimako-san provided an honest answer.

“Perhaps she couldn't tell you.”

“She couldn't tell me?”

This time around I was questioning Shimako-san.

“So you see.”

Shimako-san didn't come out and say it directly, but her eyes said, “That's the problem.”

The problem was that Mickey couldn't clearly convey her thoughts to me. And that I hadn't recognized this.

Which was why Shimako-san had involved herself, conveying Mickey's thoughts to me. I needed to start focusing on that problem more.

That was probably true. However.

“Thanks for the advice.”

I forced a smile then added one more thing.

“But, Shimako-san. Wouldn't it be better to think about yourself before worrying about other people?”

In truth, I didn't want to say this. I was truly grateful for what Shimako-san had done. But I didn't like to show my weaknesses to anyone. That barb

was said out of self-defense more than anything else.

“... I suppose.”

Shimako-san nodded slightly, then left the classroom. I waited until she was out of sight before I too left.

Why hadn't Mickey told me?

That question filled my thoughts as I walked down the hallway.

She could have simply forgotten that her fifth-period class was PE. She could be a bit absentminded from time to time. It could have just slipped her mind while she was enjoying herself.

But then why hadn't she told me that she'd been late. I'd seen her a couple of times after that. But she hadn't said a word about it, neither yesterday nor this morning.

Was she acting reserved? I considered this, but quickly discarded it.

Given our relationship, why would she be reserved? It was unthinkable.

But.

What if a distance of four years resulted in a corresponding distance between two people's hearts.

I walked aimlessly. I thought better when my body was moving than when it's sitting still.

I reached the end of the hallway and walked out the entrance.

As I walked alongside the school building, I thought, “Even so.”

Even so. Lillian's school traditions fostered a strict seniority based system. Since Mickey was younger than me, perhaps she thought that she couldn't talk to me about being late to class.

That couldn't be it. Like the Yellow Rose sisters, Hasekura Rei-sama and Shimazu Yoshino-san, there was no barrier of seniority between us.

Or take the Red Rose sisters. Hadn't Fukuzawa Yumi-san disagreed with her onee-sama about the location of the red card in the greenhouse?

Wasn't that the kind of relationship we had? Or was there something different between them and us?

Was it because we weren't soeurs?

Mickey appeared in front of me just as that question popped into my mind.

"Gokigenyou. Is something the matter?"

Mickey placed the empty trash bin she was carrying on the ground and looked curiously at me. The location I had arrived at was the school's bin site, an unnatural place to be when empty-handed.

"I was just thinking about things, and before I knew it I was here."

I couldn't come up with a better explanation quickly, so spoke the truth.

"Thinking about things?"

"Yeah."

Mickey didn't ask what I'd been thinking about. If she had asked, I probably would have told her everything.

"Hiromi-sama?"

But since I hadn't been given that opening, there was no way I could release those withheld feelings.

Even without an opening, you're better off saying what you want to say. In my head, I knew that. Still –

There were matters of tactfulness and restraint to consider too.

So then, how should I remove this barrier that existed between us?

“Mickey.”

I untied one of the ribbons that hung down beneath Mickey’s ears.

“Can I have this?”

“Huh?”

“Please. It’s important.”

I tied the ribbon around my own hair, which was just barely long enough.

“And can you make time for me tomorrow afternoon, after school?”

“Oh?”

“There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“... Okay.”

“Alright, I’ll come by your classroom once I’ve finished cleaning.”

I broke into a run on the way back.

The ribbon, my good luck charm, fluttered in the breeze.

Previously, I’d seen Sachiko-sama take one of Yumi’s ribbons and tie it in her own hair.

Perhaps I wanted the ribbon to lend me some of that courage.

* * *

The next morning, I walked over to the university and bought a rosary.

There were many possible ways to procure a rosary. But the quickest and easiest was to buy one from the university store.

Compared to buying one as a souvenir from a large church overseas, or over the internet, it may not be as individual or rare, but that didn't matter. The rosary was just a prop for the ceremony. A packaging, used to deliver my feelings for Mickey.

I was nervous all throughout the day. During class, I was constantly conscious of the rosary in the pocket of my school uniform. I barely tasted the lunch that I ate with my classmates.

When at last the annoyingly long school day was over, I went to visit the second-year pine classroom immediately after finishing cleaning.

“Tsutako-san, do you have a moment?”

My timing was spot-on and I caught her just as she was leaving the classroom. She took one glance at me and said, unprompted:

“Oh? Are you by chance about to give someone your rosary?”

“How did you know?”

“You mean I got it right? It was just a guess.”

With that, Tsutako-san decided to change her plans and accompany me, rather than continue on to the photography club's clubroom.

“It's called club activities, but photography is a solitary pursuit. We show up whenever we want, do our own individual activities and then leave whenever we want.”

Tsutako-san smiled, leaning against the corridor wall. Moreover, if she were to refuse my request then she'd probably regret it, since she'd miss out on a good photo opportunity.

“So, what kind of photograph do you want?”

I asked what she meant, and Tsutako-san explained that she could have us pose for a photo, or she could hide and take the shot from a distance, or a range of other options. I smiled and shook my head.

“When the ceremony’s over, I’ll call out to you. I want a photo of the two of us in front of the statue of Maria-sama.”

“Okay. I’ll head off then.”

“Ah, wait. She’s walking this way.”

“Walking this way? Weren’t you going to get her?”

“Yeah.... But, well.”

There was no doubting that Mickey was walking towards us down the corridor. But she wasn’t alone, another student was walking beside her. So I thought this might just be a coincidence, and that she wasn’t specifically coming to see me.

But when they noticed me standing in the corridor chatting to Tsutako-san, they stopped and bowed.

“What’s the matter? I said I was going to come and get you.”

“My deepest apologies. I imposed because I had something I wanted to say to you, Hiromi-sama.”

The girl standing beside Mickey said.

“You? To me?”

From memory, this was Masami-san. The classmate that Mickey said always had a fierce expression.

“If it’s alright with you, we should go somewhere quieter ... How about the courtyard?”

” – Okay.”

I looked at Mickey. But she looked down, unable to meet me eyes.

“... Just what do you want to say?”

“That’s for in the courtyard.”

And with that, Masami-san walked off. Mickey followed her. Left with no other choice, I followed too. At that point:

“Stop. Do you mind if I follow along too?”

Tsutako-san said. The three of us turned around simultaneously.

“After all, there’s the two of you right? So it shouldn’t matter that there’s two of us then?”

By her phrasing Tsutako-san drew a clear distinction between ‘us’ (herself and I) and ‘them’ (Mickey and Masami-san).

“But.”

“I can see by your face you think I’m trying to meddle in something that’s none of my business. Don’t worry, I won’t interfere. It’s simply to even up the numbers. Or would you prefer a one-on-one?”

Masami-san folded in the face of Tsutako-san’s persistence.

“No. That’s fine.”

“Thanks.”

As we walked, I tugged at Tsutako-san’s sleeve.

“Geeze, Tsutako-san.”

“It’s okay. They understand. If everything goes well, I’ll take a commemorative photo there.”

Even though I was planning on getting her as soon as it was over, it still felt somewhat reassuring to have her coming along with us.

“Hiromi-sama, shall we start with your topic of conversation?”

Masami-san said, once we had arrived at the courtyard.

“It’s okay, it can wait until after whatever you wanted to say, Masami-san.”

The rosary was in my pocket and it wouldn’t be long until I would hang that around Mickey’s neck. But I didn’t want to do that in front of some third-party.

Besides, no matter what Masami-san was about to say, it wouldn’t cause me to reconsider asking Mickey to be my petit soeur.

“Okay, I’ll start then.”

Masami-san got straight to the point.

“A simple request. Can you please stop following Sayuri-san around.”

“Huh?”

I said, my voice sounding fairly moronic. I hadn’t tried to anticipate what the conversation would be about, but never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that she would say that.

“You may think that nothing’s changed since elementary school, but the Sayuri-san now isn’t the same as the Sayuri-san from back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in the past you may have protected Sayuri-san from bullies, and she feels a debt of gratitude for that. However.”

“Hold on a minute. What are you talking about, with this gratitude stuff. No, more importantly – why are you the one that’s saying this? Isn’t that

something for Mickey to say, not you. Do you really think anyone would accept such things coming from a stranger?"

I was so blissfully ignorant that, even at this point, I still didn't think there was a problem. I thought that Masami-san was trying to tear apart my friendship with Mickey, although I couldn't understand why.

"Mickey. What about you? Is what this girl's saying really how you feel?"

I turned and asked Mickey, who seemed to be hiding behind Masami-san, looking at the ground.

Say it's not true. At the very least, shake your head. That was what I prayed for.

Instead, Mickey took a step forwards, raised her head and said:

"It is."

"... Mickey."

"Don't call me Mickey. I'm not a mouse."

Mickey said, her voice stronger than I had ever heard it before.

"I hated that name even when I was young. When I entered Lillian's, a place where no-one knew the old me, I thought that finally I'd be able to lead a peaceful life. That I'd finally be able to forget. But despite this, why did you ... "

"It was."

To protect my adorable Mickey. But I swallowed those words.

Watching Mickey crumble to her knees and burst into tears, I knew that nothing I could say would help.

"You ambush me at the gate. You talk about the past at every opportunity. You drag me out to the courtyard at lunch and then eat my food. And

yesterday, you took my favorite ribbon, the one my uncle brought back as a gift from his trip to France. I just can't take it any more."

" _ "

Ahh, right. That's how it was. Looking at it from Mickey's point-of-view, all I'd been doing was harassing her.

"Alright."

I said, trying to sound as positive as possible.

"But we do go to the same school, so you may see me around from time to time. Unpleasant as that may be."

"That's unavoidable. I wouldn't ask you to leave the school over this. Just, please, leave me alone."

"And I ate the wiener so I can't give that back, but I'll return your ribbon to you. Ahh, I don't have it on me at the moment. What should I do about that?"

Even as I said it, I was mocking myself about that wiener comment.

Mickey said it was fine to leave it in her shoe-box, and I agreed.

Our strictly business conversation finished with the first-years saying, "Well then," and turning away. They didn't ask about what I had initially intended to say to Mickey. Since they wanted nothing further to do with me, it probably didn't matter to them what I had wanted to say. As she hugged Mickey's shoulders, Masami-san's face looked kind and completely nonthreatening.

"Miike Sayuri-san."

I wanted to put on a show of courage, to call her out at the end.

"You wouldn't have been able to say this without your friend lending you her strength."

Mickey turned to look back once and laughed coldly, then dropped her head and didn't turn back a second time.

"... Tsutako-san, did you know this was going to happen?"

I asked, once Mickey and Masami-san had disappeared back into the school building.

"No way. But I did get the sense that it wasn't going to be a particularly nice conversation."

"Really? I guess that makes sense."

Mickey had shown up, accompanied by a friend. It probably hadn't looked like being a normal, friendly chat.

"Tsutako-san. Take a photo."

"Okay, ..."

I knew what Tsutako-san wanted to say. While I was asking her to take the photo, my face had suddenly crumpled.

"I don't want to forget what happened today. So I want a record of this to remain."

"Like Tokugawa Ieyasu."

Tsutako-san said, taking her camera out of its case.

"Ieyasu?"

"He had his portrait painted after he lost a battle. I think it was the battle of Mikatagahara. You didn't know?"

"No."

Then after that he went on to rule over all Japan. Even though it currently felt like I'd been beaten down so badly that I couldn't tell what was going

to happen, the future didn't have to be completely bleak.

"I thought I was being an ally of justice. But to Mickey, I was just an invading bully."

Tsutako-san had her camera out and I stood tall and looked straight at it. One after another, the tears ran down my cheeks, but I didn't wipe them away.

"One day she'll understand that."

I refuted those words of consolation from my friend.

"Better that she doesn't. If some day she does understand the tears that I shed today, then the pain of the bullies will stay with her for the rest of her life."

"... Geeze, you really are awkward."

After Tsutako-san voiced her amazement, the soothing sound of the shutter rang out.

"But you're not a bad person."

Frame of Mind 6

“Is it alright to come in?”

Shyly opening the biscuit door was Hosokawa Kanako-chan.

“Ah. The troublesome first-year is back again.”

Yoshino-san whispered, and Yumi silenced her with an elbow.

“I have a request for Takeshima Tsutako-sama ... ”

Kanako-chan looked around the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion and smiled, relieved, when she saw the person she was looking for. She was wearing the basketball club’s uniform, with her long hair tied in a single ponytail. Like Katsura-san before her, her appearance gave the impression that she had come in the middle of a club practice session. Her bare legs went on for so long that it made finding a place to look a bit difficult, even though they were both girls.

“You’re really popular today, huh.”

Tsutako-san responded to this light banter with, “That’s no joke,” and stood up and walked over to Kanako-chan. It looked as though she knew what Kanako-chan had come here for.

“I’ve heard all about it from the basketball club president. Sorry, was it supposed to be today?”

“Ahh, no. Not exactly.”

Kanako-chan raised both her hands up to shoulder-height and shook them back and forth.

“There was no specific date set but, luckily, today satisfies all our conditions.”

“Is the basketball club making a booklet too?”

Yumi asked, and the response she got was, “No.”

“An autograph collection, on colored paper, with a photo mounted in the center.”

Not exactly the same, but something pretty close anyway. It looked like all the clubs were making something for their graduating seniors.

The three conditions of the basketball club, namely (1) that no third-years be present, (2) that all the first- and second-years were present, and (3) that the supervising teacher be present, were all fulfilled, so Kanako-chan had hurriedly set off in search of Tsutako-san. It was just bad luck that saw Tsutako-san in the Rose Mansion today, a place she rarely set foot in.

“How did you find out? That Tsutako-san was here, I mean.”

Although Kanako-chan had found Tsutako-san in the end, so perhaps you could say it was good luck.

“The tennis club’s – ”

“Katsura-san?”

“Yes, her. I ran into her when I was leaving the clubhouse.”

The presidents of the basketball and tennis clubs were both in the same class and quite good friends, so they’d often swap information about their respective clubs. Consequently, they both knew that the other was also planning on asking Tsutako-san to take photographs for their club. Katsura-san probably guessed what was going on when she saw a first-year student in the basketball club’s uniform wandering around the cultural clubhouse, and called out to her. “Are you, perchance, looking for Takeshima Tsutako-san?” That kind of thing.

Yumi was nodding along to this, when she thought back and said, “Huh?”

“Hey. Why do you think Katsura-san came here in the first place?”

“Well, that’s because she wanted Tsutako-san to take photos for the tennis club, right?”

As she summarized the conversation that took place before she arrived, Yoshino-san looked at Yumi, as though to say, “Why are you asking this now?”

“I know that. That’s not what I was asking.”

“What Yumi-san wanted to say was, how did Katsura-san know that Tsutako-san was in the Rose Mansion?”

Yumi nodded in agreement at Shimako-san’s words. The usual places to look for Tsutako-san would be the clubhouse and her classroom, so how did Katsura-san come up with the Rose Mansion?

“She could have asked Shouko-chan?”

“Nope. Shouko-chan wasn’t told that we were going to the Rose Mansion.”

“So she asked someone in the second-year pine class then.”

“I wonder – ”

Certainly, there had been a couple of students still remaining in the classroom when they left. They hadn’t explicitly told anyone where they were going, but if any of their classmates had overheard their conversation then they would probably relay this to anyone that came looking for Tsutako-san. Yumi was just about to ask Tsutako-san her thoughts on this when she saw the faraway look on her face.

“The clubhouse ... Was Shouko-chan there?”

Tsutako-san asked Kanako-chan, not noticing Yumi’s gaze.

“Naitou Shouko-san from first-year chrysanthemum group? Nope?”

Kanako-chan then followed up with more information.

“She wasn’t at the clubhouse, she was walking through the courtyard in front of the Rose Mansion.”

“The courtyard?”

Tsutako-san opened the window and looked outside. But, sadly, Shouko-chan was nowhere to be seen. Naturally, it wasn’t possible to see the entire courtyard from that window, so she might still be close by.

“I wonder what she’s doing.”

Standing outside the clubroom door, wandering around the courtyard. It was definitely suspicious. Since she was in the clubhouse, she could have gone into the clubroom (they’d talked about the third-years doting on her, so they would have let her in). Similarly, if she’d wanted to see Tsutako-san then she could have just entered the Rose Mansion, rather than loitering in the courtyard.

Tsutako-san closed the window and turned around, then gave an embarrassed and self-deprecating laugh when she noticed everyone looking at her.

“At any rate, I’ll head off to the gymnasium.”

She quickly returned the photographs spread across the table to their original envelopes, then took a camera out of its cloth bag. This one was different to the compact camera that she’d used to take a photo of Yumi on their way to the Rose Mansion. Yumi had very little knowledge of cameras so had absolutely no idea how they were different or what their features were, but was certain that Tsutako-san did.

“Ahh, that’s right.”

Tsutako-san remembered to hand the film with ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ written on it over to Yumi. So that she could protect it from Yoshino-san’s devilish hands.

“Yumi-sama.”

Kanako-chan, who was leaving with Tsutako-san, stopped at the biscuit door, turned around and smiled.

“Isn’t it great? I’m so glad.”

Yoshino-san muttered, “What is?” as they listened to the creaking sounds of the staircase, but Yumi understood the message.

Kanako-chan was talking about Touko-chan.

Bouton of Light

The first time I saw her was on the day of the first-year's welcoming ceremony.

Although not at the welcoming ceremony itself. That morning, as she was standing by herself in a hallway on the first-floor of the school building, I gazed at her figure from some distance behind, and that was all.

She was looking out through an open window.

Her appearance was beautiful, like something out of a poem.

I had a premonition.

Meeting her would have a profound impact on my life.

I soon learned her name.

Fukuzawa Yumi. Rosa Chinensis en bouton. The petit soeur of Rosa Chinensis.

She stood beside Rosa Chinensis during the welcoming ceremony, assisting her onee-sama.

Even someone like myself, who only entered Lillian's at the start of high-school, knew about the three Roses at the top of the Yamayurikai, Lillian's high-school student council, and their petit soeurs, who were called boutons.

This knowledge was acquired naturally, from fragments of conversations I'd heard my fellow classmates engaged in – it wasn't something I'd actively pursued.

– Classmates. In particular, Matsudaira Touko and her band of merry friends were always making a fuss.

They'd treated their self-introductions to the class as a joke, called out shrilly whenever one of the Roses walked past our classroom, got way too excited about class seating positions and handled the physical examinations like some kind of circus event.

But it's not like they were cutting themselves off from the students who'd come from other schools, by passing Lillian's entrance exam. It started with, "Why don't we have lunch together?" but they'd also offer other assistance, such as, "I can help you if you're having trouble memorizing the prayers," or, "Feel free to ask if there's anything you don't understand."

As someone with a rule of never buying from pushy salesmen, they quickly became accustomed to me declining their offers and moved on to easier targets. Thankfully, they also came to regard me as someone who was a bit strange, and so left me alone.

Through until the end of middle-school, I'd always attended co-ed public schools.

My father's infidelity, and my parents subsequent divorce, still loomed large in my thoughts and I'd chosen an all-girls school thinking that I didn't care where I went as long as there were no males present. I set my sights on Lillian's because of its extremely high barrier to entry, so that my classmates from middle school couldn't say, "She's only going to a private school because she failed the public school entrance exams." I hated those girls who fawned over boys almost as much as I hated the boys themselves.

They'd refer to themselves by their first names rather than using "I," and they'd talk in a sweet voice. The way Matsudaira Touko spoke was close to this, and it always made me uncomfortable when she acted cute because it reminded me so much of my former classmates, half of whom were obsessed with boys. That's why I was unable to get along with her, although I was only vaguely aware of it.

Before long, the rainy season had arrived.

One morning, quite by chance, I found myself seated next to Fukuzawa Yumi-sama for the bus ride to school. Since I was facing forwards as I lined up for the bus I hadn't noticed her, but apparently she was two or three people behind me in line. Without thinking about it, I settled down on a two-seater towards the back of the bus. Not long after, Yumi-sama said, "Pardon me," and sat down beside me.

"Gokigenyou, Rosa Chinensis en bouton."

"Gokigenyou. The weather's not letting up, is it?"

She was probably used to strangers approaching her. Yumi-sama returned my greeting amiably. She then looked out the window and let out a small sigh, perhaps depressed by the cloudy skies.

"You dislike the rain?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

Yumi said, then smiled and continued with:

"But the way the moisture ruins my hair is a bit annoying."

Even though she was Rosa Chinensis en bouton. I suppose her unassuming manner was probably the secret behind her popularity.

When we stood up to get off the bus, Yumi-sama took one look at me and hurriedly asked, "Are you, by chance, a senior?" She obviously thought I was older than her based on my height, which she probably hadn't noticed when we'd been sitting down.





“No, I’m a first-year.”

I smiled. I usually didn’t like being singled out because of my height, but I didn’t mind at all that time.

A few days later, I witnessed a strange scene.

It was on the path leading to Milk Hall. Matsudaira Touko and Yumi-sama were arguing. Well, that’s not quite accurate. If I had to say, it felt more like Matsudaira Touko was haranguing Yumi-sama about something.

I don’t know what they were talking about. It seemed like something had rubbed Matsudaira Touko the wrong way. But still Yumi-sama wouldn’t say anything. She just stood there, looking straight at Matsudaira Touko and waiting for a break in the diatribe. When it came, Yumi-sama merely said, “You have no right to say something like that.”

She was beautiful.

Her faintly quivering lips. Her eyes, filled with strength. For someone whose upbringing was seemingly free of interpersonal conflict, the way she stood her ground without flinching looked innocent and divine. She had the solemn beauty of someone using their body to shield something important.

Just as I was starting to detest Matsudaira Touko for cornering Yumi-sama, I also felt a funny sort of pity for her too.

I’d come to a realization.

In some ways, Matsudaira Touko and I were very similar. We both struggled with the dark shadow that we held in our hearts, unable to either accept it or drive it away.

The shadow sought the light. And the shadow inside Touko had keenly sensed it too. But even though the light was right there she hurled insults and pushed herself further away from it, rather than reaching out for it.

I would never do something so foolish. If you yearn for the light, you have to be ready to emit it.

The rainy season ended and Yumi-sama was shining ever more radiantly. There were those who said it was because Rosa Chinensis had returned from her short absence, but I chose to believe it was because the weather was no longer ruining her hair.

Yumi-sama wasn't the kind of person who stopped glowing because someone else wasn't there. Yumi-sama was the sun. And when her light shined on us, it made us shine too, like the moon.

I spotted Yumi-sama in the library, standing on tiptoes trying to reach a book on the top shelf.

"Let me get that for you."

I easily picked the book out and handed it to her. It was at times like these that my usually annoying height was a great asset.

"Thank-you very much. Regrettably all the step-ladders were in use, so you were a great help."

Yumi-sama said, looking up at me.

"You don't have to be so formal, I'm only a first-year."

I forced a smile.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah."

Yumi-sama hadn't remembered me from our brief encounter on the bus.

A tall person with long hair. With those conspicuous features, for better or worse, I should have been easy to remember. Yet I'd completely slipped from Yumi-sama's memory. For some reason, that felt incredibly reassuring.

“There may be other books that you can’t reach.”

“Well then, could you accompany me for now?”

“Of course.”

Another couple of encounters with her and she would probably recognize me as a first-year.

She would probably even remember my name, some day.

I would continue to wait patiently.

That was fine.

Even the statue of Maria-sama probably still couldn’t remember the names and faces of all the students at this school.

Frame of Mind 7

“Oh, Tsutako-san isn’t here?”

The next one to appear was Yamaguchi Mami-san, from the newspaper club.

“Wow, it’s just like Yumi-san said, Tsutako-san really is popular today.”

Hearing Yoshino-san’s remark, Mami-san looked on in amazement.

“So you’re saying that there were people here before me?”

“Correct. You’re the third.”

The third person to come to the Rose Mansion looking for Tsutako-san. In order, there was Katsura-san, Kanako-chan and now Mami-san. Shouko-chan wasn’t counted in that number because she hadn’t made an appearance yet, even though she was apparently loitering somewhere nearby. The reason Tsutako-san wasn’t currently present was because she’d gone to the gymnasium with her second visitor, Kanako-chan.

“By the way, who told you that Tsutako-san was here?”

“It was Naitou Shouko-chan, why?”

Oh, now she’d made an appearance.

“Was she at the clubhouse?”

“Or in the courtyard?”

Yumi and Yoshino-san took turns asking the questions. Shimako-san merely listened silently in this kind of situation. It wasn’t as though she was completely uninterested, instead her stance seemed to be that she was willing to leave it up to the other two since they got so excited. There had

been times when they'd gone so fast that Shimako-san seemed to get flustered about whether or not to interject.

"In the hallway. Out in front of the staff room."

Mami-san answered.

"So, that means she was in the school building, then."

The three future Roses looked at each other and nodded. Naturally, Mami-san was puzzled by this behavior.

"Why, are you looking for Shouko-chan or something?"

"Not as such, no."

"Really? Because I think she'd probably still be at the nurse's station."

"The nurse's station?"

"She skinned the palm of her hand. She said she'd fallen down while she was cleaning, and she'd put a band-aid on it herself, but the band-aid was too small and blood was seeping out around the edges. It looked kind of pathetic. So I told her that we'd go see the nurse and then walked her over there. Right before I came here."

The trio looked at each other. So that would mean that Shouko-chan walked from the clubhouse to the courtyard, and then on to the corridor outside the staff room, all whilst bleeding from the palm of her hand. Given her reluctance to see the school nurse, what possible reason could she have for wandering all over the school grounds?

"So anyway, Tsutako-san isn't here ... "

Mami-san said, then let out a sigh.

"It's no big deal, I guess. I'll talk to her about it tomorrow in class."

“Ah, don’t be that way. Stay and have a cup of tea. Tsutako-san’s only gone to the gymnasium, so I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

Yumi said, standing up and taking a teacup down from the shelf beside the sink.

“Well, I suppose I could stay for one cup.”

Mami-san had been heading towards the door, but now that the preparations for tea were under way she returned and sat down at the table. In the same seat that Tsutako-san had been sitting in while doing her club work.

When they were holding their Yamayurikai meetings or eating lunch in the Rose Mansion they each had their accustomed position at the table. But things became slightly more irregular when visitors were mixed in.

In this instance, Tsutako-san and Yumi had been the first to arrive, and had sat down facing each other. Then Yoshino-san had arrived, followed by Shimako-san and they’d each seated themselves around the table to maintain a sense of balance. So when Tsutako-san left, her chair was the one that you’d naturally choose to sit in.

“Oh ... is that a photo?”

Mami-san picked up something from the seat beside her.

“Ah, she was sorting through her photographs, just before.”

Tsutako-san had been in such a hurry to tidy up before going to the gymnasium that she probably hadn’t noticed that she’d dropped one of her photos.

“Well, look at that.”

Mami-san waved the photograph, with an air of authority.

“Things are definitely more interesting when you’re playing a leading role than when you’re looking in from the outside.”

The Greenhouse Fairy

A fairy inhabits the old greenhouse.

It's a secret tale that everyone knows about it, but no-one talks about.

* * *

This all started in May, not long after advancing into high-school.

“You’ve been coming here since kindergarten, but you’ve never noticed that greenhouse until today?”

Satsuki’s classmate, Yoriko-san, looked at her with the same kind of expression one might make upon encountering a giant salamander in the middle of the city.

It was recess. They were in the middle of an idle conversation, sitting down and facing each other with a desk between them.

“Saying that I’ve never noticed it is not quite right.”

But if someone asked what was in that general area, nothing would come to mind. It must have registered on her retina every time she went there. But it wasn’t something that she was consciously aware of.

“See, take the air as an example. Normally, you don’t feel the air when you breathe, right? That’s what it’s like.”

“So, then, you felt the unexpected sensation of air this morning, Satsuki-san? While you were strolling around the grounds after arriving at school early.”

“The air was just an example.”

Satsuki corrected her. As for the unexpected sensation, the truth felt a little bit different, but she couldn't quite articulate the difference and so remained silent. In reality, it felt like something had been calling to her, inviting her in.

“Pardon me. Anyway, you noticed the greenhouse. The old greenhouse. So then what happened?”

Yoriko-san emphasized the ‘old’ part because their school also had another, ‘new,’ greenhouse. All of the educational facilities had been moved over to the new greenhouse.

“Driven by curiosity, I peeked inside. I was surprised by how neat it was. It was astonishing.”

Everything was arranged precisely, and the plants were all healthy.

“Oh, you thought it was a dilapidated old building?”

“Well, yeah.”

Satsuki nodded her head. After all, the exterior was quite old and the glass was cracking in places. There was no doubt in her mind that the building had stood for many long years beyond its useful lifespan.

Despite that, the moment she entered into the greenhouse a dreamy world full of variously colored blooming roses had unfolded in front of her. As though they had existed without disturbance.

“Since it was my first time there, I was fooled by that juxtaposition.”

Yoriko-san let out a sigh that was part amazement and part admiration.

“Still, it is an undeniably pretty spot.”

She must have been there numerous times to be so unmoved by it. After all, it was a school facility. It seemed to mean about the same to Yoriko-san as

the music room or the clubhouse.

“Say, you don’t happen to know who looks after those roses, do you?”

Satsuki-san asked, leaning forwards. Yoriko-san responded with, “Mmmm,” which could be interpreted as either, “I know,” or, “I don’t know.”

“I’ve never met her directly. I don’t know her name either.”

“Ahh, so it’s a student from the gardening club, or the environmental care committee?”

“We don’t have a gardening club at our school.”

“Ah, right.”

“Still, the environmental care committee isn’t a bad theory.”

“Not bad – how?”

“The environmental care committee has a sum of money set aside in its budget for maintenance of the greenhouse.”

Yoriko-san was incredibly well informed on this matter because she was currently a member of the environmental care committee.

“So ... wait, huh?”

In that case it seemed strange that Yoriko-san would never have met the girl, if they were both members of the environmental care committee.

“Honestly, when we’re doing our environmental care committee work we never do any maintenance on that greenhouse.”

“The environmental care committee doesn’t take care of it?”

“Despite its name, the environmental care committee doesn’t take care of the martial arts building, or the staff room, or places like that either.”

“Ahh, I see.”

The martial arts building was maintained by the students from the kendo club, the judo club and the other clubs that used it. The staff room was controlled by the teachers, and the students weren’t allowed to touch it.

“It’s like those.”

So there was someone who was akin to the owner of the old greenhouse, and everything was entrusted to them.

The bell for the start of class rang and Yoriko-san was turning her chair around to face the front when she quietly said:

“A fairy inhabits the old greenhouse.”

A fairy inhabits the old greenhouse.

After hearing that, Satsuki became completely obsessed with the idea.

What was surprising was how large a portion of the school knew the legend, or rumor, of the fairy inhabiting the greenhouse.

“About the fairy? I’ve heard of it. And?”

Mami-san, a recent addition to the newspaper club, responded in an uninterested tone as she swept. Satsuki used the dustpan to collect the classroom’s dust.

“Have you seen it, Mami-san?”

“The fairy? Yeah, right.”

“And the ‘Lillian Kwaraban’ isn’t going to investigate it?”





Satsuki was wondering why she was asking all these questions while they were cleaning, but still couldn't stop herself from asking.

“Nope.”

Mami-san responded immediately, then took the dustpan from Satsuki's hand and walked over to the rubbish bin with it.

“I see the question, “Why?” written all over your face. That's not my personal opinion, it's the consensus of the newspaper club. Of course, finding out who the fairy was would be a major scoop. But we still wouldn't make a newspaper article out of it.”

“Why not?”

Satsuki asked, as she followed Mami-san. Mami-san responded, seeming somewhat exasperated, with:

“The newspaper club exists solely because of our readers. We won't publish something that the majority of our readers, the students at this school, wouldn't support.”

“Huh?”

“Don't you get it? The student body wants to believe in the fairy. They don't want us to expose it, and ruin the myth.”

Since it's such a special endangered creature, why not arrange a peaceful environment for it? That's almost what her classmate seemed to be saying.

“Teacher. There's something I don't understand.”

When Satsuki went to the staff room to return the cleaning journal, Yamamura-sensei hadn't yet left to supervise her club so Satsuki went over to her and petitioned her.

“Was it around when you were here? The legend of the fairy in the old greenhouse.”

“Well, we didn’t call it the ‘old’ greenhouse. But there was a story about a fairy living there, yes.”

“I wonder why I keep thinking about it so much. It’s not like I want to expose the secret.”

“Hmmm, I think I understand.”

Yamamura-sensei, having completed the prep work for her club, arose from her chair said:

“You’re a true believer. So you’d like to get your hands on some proof, no?”

Maybe that was true. Listening to her teacher’s theory, Satsuki found herself agreeing with it, somewhat.

Like a child that believes in Santa Claus. A child that earnestly wants to meet him, not considering that it might be their father playing Santa Claus.

But by pulling on the Santa Claus thread it all unravels, and the Santa Claus within them is destroyed. That’s probably why no-one was willing to touch the legend of the fairy. That was, in some sense, right. A perceptive adult’s way of thinking. But knowing that just made Satsuki want to meet the fairy even more. After all, that old greenhouse was a paradise. If it had been the fairy that had made it that way, then she wanted to meet it, even if it was only one time.

After that, she went to check out the greenhouse a couple of times. Right, a couple of times. It wasn’t really all that many.

She may have been able to increase her chances by going there every day during lunchtime or after school, but it seemed like that would be disrespectful to the fairy, so she didn’t.

It was also possible that the fairy wouldn't appear when humans were watching. In that case, the plants would be neglected and, consequently, wither and die. Which would be a tragic outcome.

Over time, she became less concerned about meeting the fairy that took care of the flowers. The greenhouse was a comforting place to be. It was probably just her imagination, but sometimes it felt like the plants greeted Satsuki with a warm welcome and an invitation to chat when she came to visit.

One morning she arrived at school a bit early because of a quick bus transfer. She entered into the greenhouse for the first time in about three days when suddenly a voice rang out.

“Water, please.”

“Huh?”

Satsuki looked around, but couldn't see anyone else. In fact, she'd never seen anyone else there.

Still.

“You ... want water?”

Satsuki inquired of the potted plant beside her, feeling foolish as she did so. This time she didn't actually hear anything, but she still got the impression that it said, “Yes, yes.”

“Alright. Just wait.”

Satsuki rushed towards the greenhouse exit. Whereupon.

“Where are you going? There's a tap in here, you know.”

A girl, standing by the exit, called out to her. She was wearing the same uniform as Satsuki. Probably a senior. Satsuki didn't recognize her, but she was obviously a student of Lillian's high school.

She said, “Over here,” and guided Satsuki to the tap, then set down a watering can and turned on the faucet.

The morning sun streaming through the outer glass walls brilliantly illuminated the line from her shoulder to the middle of her back. It was so dazzling that the sunlight seemed to form an optical illusion. Satsuki thought she saw a translucent pair of wings there, like those of a mayfly.

After gathering some water, the girl offered the watering can to Satsuki, saying, “Here you go.”

While they were still huddled together, without saying another word, the girl suddenly smiled.

“It’s okay, I understand. The water isn’t for you to drink.”

“Huh?”

“You made a promise, right? Therefore you should be the one to do it.”

“But, who was asking for water?”

Maybe that voice from before hadn’t been hers.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh? Then ... ”

The girl walked over to where Satsuki had come from and gently lowered her face towards the exact same plant that Satsuki had been standing beside.

“You still don’t understand? Even though she clearly asked you to bring her some water.”

That was Satsuki’s first encounter with Shii.

One day, during the summer holidays, Satsuki was in the old greenhouse.

“*Rosa chinensis*. *Rosa luciae*. *Rosa hirtula*.”

She read out the names as she compared the budding flower to the color photocopies she’d made of a library reference book. She’d lost track of time, immersing herself in her task. The flower was just one of many, but she wanted to know its species.

“You don’t have to force yourself to learn their names. The names are just a convenient designation for humans. They don’t mean anything to the flowers.”

“Shii!”

Shii was standing there, holding a plastic bottle filled with tea, and had been there for who knows how long.

“Don’t tell me you come here every day?”

“Nope. Every four days or so. Why do you ask?”

“Because every time I come here, it seems like you’re here, May.”

“So you come every four days or so too ... Should we stagger our visits?”

If they only came to water the plants, then one person would surely suffice. If they alternated visits, then they’d only have to come half as often.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s like I’ve always told you, coming here isn’t some kind of obligation.”

“We merely come here whenever we feel like it and water the flowers. This greenhouse and the plants here don’t belong to anybody.”

“Right.”

“But what if neither of us came here?”

“Then we wouldn’t come.”

“... Okay.”

“Things would be fine. When neither you nor I are able to come here, someone else will.”

“Really?”

“Really. The roses will call to them. They called to you, didn’t they May?”

“I suppose.”

“They did.”

Shii smiled.

“This time around, the roses probably called out to both of us. Because they wanted to listen to us chat.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. So let’s honor their request.”

Shii had started calling Satsuki by the name “May” some time after she’d started regularly visiting the greenhouse. Satsuki couldn’t remember when exactly, but it was probably when she’d told Shii her name. Satsuki literally meant the fifth month⁶. Which was May.

Satsuki’s name is written as 皐月 which, as mentioned, means the fifth month.

Conversely, Satsuki had no idea why Shii was called “Shii” – it could be “C,” “Sea,” “She,” “See,” or something else entirely. It was also possible that it was simply a shortening of her name, but without asking there was no way to find out.

As far as they were concerned, the nicknames were the only things they needed to know about each other. They never met outside the greenhouse. The Shii in the greenhouse was the only Shii that May knew.

As Shii often said, she was merely helping out to ensure that the plants inside the greenhouse led a comfortable life.

She wanted to be a friend to the flowers.

She did what she could as a way of expressing her gratitude for being shown a lovely sight. Therefore, she didn't want it to become a job.

Satsuki found that way of thinking absolutely wonderful.

During the second term, even though it hadn't been her intention, Satsuki learned a little bit about the Shii outside the greenhouse.

During the athletics festival, Satsuki caught sight of Shii wearing a green headband and helping the green team.

In the beginning of October, at the same time that the second-years went on their school trip, Satsuki didn't see Shii for the entire week.

So Shii was probably in the second-year pine class, but knowing that didn't cause any strong reaction from Satsuki. Once she'd taken a step outside the greenhouse Shii was no longer Shii, but some student with a different name. So even if Satsuki saw her around school, she couldn't call out to her.

Once the second-years had returned from their trip, the final preparations for the school festival began. They didn't really talk about class much, but Satsuki could tell that Shii was busy.

Even if Satsuki continued to go to the greenhouse, it looked like the days when they wouldn't be able to meet stretched on.

Shii had always said that this wasn't some kind of obligation. So if she didn't show up, Satsuki couldn't really inquire as to why.

Even if Shii didn't show up, Satsuki thought she was capable of looking after the greenhouse for the ten days or so until the school festival. After all, she'd worked hard by herself when Shii was away on the school trip. Still,

Satsuki felt there was something slightly different about the school trip, when Shii had been overseas, and now, when Shii was coming to school but they weren't able to meet.

Occasionally the watering can would be in a different position to where she'd left it the previous day, and when she went around to water the flowers she'd find the soil was already damp. This led Satsuki to believe that Shii was still visiting.

“Did Shii come here? Was she okay?”

As Satsuki gently brushed the flower petals, she wondered why she hadn't been able to be there when Shii visited. But she couldn't just wait there, like a spider in its web. Satsuki was a first-year student, and not only did she have lessons but she also had to stay back after school to help with her class's preparations for the school festival.

Saturday, the day before the school festival.

On that day, the plan had been to work into the evening, transforming their classroom into an exhibition hall, but after lunch Satsuki quietly slipped out and went to check on the greenhouse. A lot of her classmates had to leave in the morning, or had to help out with their club preparations as well, so they were free to come and go as they pleased.

Shii hadn't come to the greenhouse. But things would surely return to normal from next week, once the school festival was over.

The flowers would once again be surrounded by the sounds of their joyous chatting. Soon they'd probably have to start thinking about preparing for winter.

Trembling, she spun around and surveyed the greenhouse, like she was dancing.

“I'm sure you're happy too, right? Shii will – ”

When she spoke, Satsuki felt that something was wrong. She hadn't sensed the overjoyed reaction she'd been expecting from the flowers.

"What's the matter?"

Satsuki made the discovery when she brought her face close to the flowers. The leaves looked different to normal. There was a whitish powder clinging to them.

"What's this?"

The white substance on the leaves wasn't just confined to that one plant. The one beside it, and the one beside that, and, looking closer, all the plants in that area were affected to one degree or another.

"They're ill," Satsuki instantly thought.

"... What should I do?"

If it were just one leaf, she could prune it off. If it were some kind of noxious insect, she could painstakingly eradicate them one by one. But with the illness so widely spread, Satsuki had no idea what to do.

Naturally, the plants wouldn't tell her what they wanted. The few times she had felt like they were talking to her had obviously been some form of delusion.

The flowers said things like "Water, please," or, "Change the facing of the pot." The words they spoke never exceeded the extent of Satsuki's knowledge.

And while she stood there, asking herself "What should I do?" over and over again, the disease was undoubtedly spreading.

"Shii!"

Satsuki flew out of the greenhouse. Shii would tell her what to do. She'd know how to treat this disease.

There was activity all throughout the school building. Lots of classrooms had their doors open, with students working out in the hallway.

Satsuki hurried to the second-year classrooms. Thoughts about the flowers were filling her head, to the point that she forgot the rule about walking in the hallway. No, she was probably incapable of walking. She ran on, frantically.

“Excuse me.”

Standing outside the second-year pine group classroom, Satsuki called out loudly and a number of students looked at her as they continued to work.

“Can you call someone over for me, umm ... ”

She made it that far, then lost the words she was going to say next.

“Umm ... ”

Satsuki didn’t know Shii’s real name.

“Okay, who did you want to see?”

The student who had stopped what she was doing and approached Satsuki was not Shii. Nor were the other students who had quietly resumed what they were working on. Shii wasn’t in the classroom.

“Umm.”

Even if Satsuki said, “Shii,” the student she was talking to probably wouldn’t know who she meant. The custom in the high-school division of Lillian’s Academy was to append the honorific ‘san’ to people’s names. Nicknames were rarely used.

“It wasn’t urgent, I’ll come back later.”

Satsuki turned around.

“Ah, you’re leaving?”

No matter how she looked at it, it was urgent. But there was nothing else she could say that would help.

After all, how could she ask to speak to someone when she didn't know their name?

None of the people Satsuki passed in the hallway were Shii. Nor were any of the girls gathered in the courtyard.

Even though there were so many students, Shii was not among them.

There was no way Satsuki would be able to find the Shii that she met in the greenhouse, that she spent all that time alone with, hidden among the great mass of students.

Did Shii even exist in this world to begin with? Perhaps she was some kind of illusion, a vision created out of Satsuki's desire for there to be a fairy.

Having not found Shii, Satsuki returned to the greenhouse to find someone else already there.

"Shii?"

Satsuki called, thinking it was her, but the girl turned around and shook her head.

Right. It wasn't Shii. This girl was a bit shorter than Shii, and her hair was longer and styled slightly differently.

"I've sprayed them with pesticide, so they'll be fine."

"Ah, umm."

"This was your first time seeing it, so you must have been surprised. But this kind of thing happens from time to time."

"How did you know?"

The other girl slowly approached Satsuki while she stood there, uncomprehending.

“I’d say the roses called out to me.”

” ... Oh?”

“But that would be a lie. When I saw you desperately searching for Shii I thought something must be up, so I came to the greenhouse to see for myself.”

“You know Shii?”

“Of course I know her. And I know about you too, May.”

Satsuki instantly understood. That this person was like Shii and herself. So when she sensed a crisis with the roses, she came to help.

“Ah.”

The strength suddenly drained from her stiff body, and Satsuki slumped to the ground.

They’ll be fine. Those words penetrated deep into her heart. They’ll be fine. The roses were saved.

“Thank-you very much. I couldn’t hear the voices of the roses. So I had no idea what to give them.”

It started off as an expression of gratitude, but midway through it turned into a soliloquy.

Satsuki thought she was a long way off being able to look after the plants by herself for ten days. As soon as something unexpected happened, there was nothing she could do. This girl must have had some kind of training in how to look after plants.

“I tried to be like Shii, but it didn’t go so well.”

She felt helpless, miserable and regretful.

As Satsuki remained with her hands pressed against the ground and her face looking down, the sound of laughter echoed around above her.

“When someone’s sick, only a doctor knows what’s wrong, no?”

“Sick?”

Satsuki raised her head.

“Right. At the moment, these children are sick. A mother will know if her baby’s hungry, or needs their diaper changed, but they aren’t able to judge if the child needs fever medicine or antibiotics, for instance. But if a new mother notices that her child is unwell, that’s enough for a passing grade, don’t you think?”

“A passing grade?”

“When you’re a veteran, you’ll know more. But you noticed something was wrong and went to find Shii. Well done. Ah, if the rumors are true – ”

Interrupting her sentence, Shii flew into the greenhouse with tremendous speed.

“May!”

“Hi Shii. You’re late.”

Shii started in amazement at the girl who was cheerfully waving, and murmured:

“Fey... ? Sorry, gokigenyou, it’s been a while.”

After this friendly greeting, Shii turned towards Satsuki and performed an introduction.

“This is Fey. She’s a third-year, one year above me. She hasn’t been around much recently, so this is probably the first time you’ve met her, right May?”

Fey probably taught Shii all kinds of things last year. In that case, Shii probably didn't know much when she started either.

"Since you were so late Shii, I had to step in myself."

"Please do, by all means."

Shii looked around and seemed to instantly grasp what had happened and the treatment that had been applied. She said, "Things were bad, huh," then embraced Satsuki around the shoulder and helped her stand up.

"My classmates told me that May was looking for me, so I ran out here in a hurry. But I needn't have worried since you were here, Fey."

Shii folded her arms and nodded, but Satsuki shook her head and said:

"But, how did your classmates know that I was looking for you?"

"You asked for me, right?"

"I don't know your name, Shii."

"No way. Surely I've told you it."

Shii was taken aback. Apparently she hadn't been trying to hide her identity. Instead, she thought she had already told Satsuki. Such a trivial matter, that Satsuki involuntarily slumped again.

But that was the truth, and as proof of that Shii tore a page out of her school notebook, wrote her full name on it and handed it to Satsuki.

Since she'd only ever known Shii as Shii, it felt a bit weird seeing her full name for the first time.

"So then, why are you called Shii?"

Satsuki tactlessly put her question into words. Her name didn't contain the kanji character for 'sea', none of her initials were 'C,' nor did the character 'shi' appear anywhere in her name.

Shii and Fey looked at each other.

“... What was it again?”

Apparently Shii was a nickname given to her by an older student who had since graduated, and its origin and relevance had been forgotten.

With the school festival safely over with, the gentle daily school-life resumed.

Having momentarily lost her self-confidence, Satsuki was studying hard to try and catch up to Shii and Fey.

“You don’t have to work so hard, you know.”

Shii said.

“The roses are laughing. They’ve never seen such a studious fairy.”

“Huh? What did you say?”

Satsuki asked, raising her head from the horticulture book she had borrowed from the library.

“I was talking about you, May. You’re already a splendid fairy.”

“No way.”

Satsuki scoffed, then returned to concentrating on her book. Apparently they could prepare for the following year’s round of disease and pests by caring for the soil during the winter.

“Well, there are all types in fairy society, so whatever pleases you should be fine.”

“I’ll do as I please then.”

Outside, a cold wind blew.

Even though the glass walls were starting to crack, inside it was surprisingly warm.

Satsuki closed her book and slowly walked beside Shii down the central corridor.

A fairy's life-span was a scant three years, so Satsuki thought she should put her all into it. She would study more about plants, put more of what she learned into practice, and listen carefully to the words of the flowers more.

So that when Shii graduated, she'd be able to stand on her own.

And then, in due course, she'd hand over this precious old greenhouse to someone else.

“Did you hear the flowers' voices?”

The day when, unexpectedly, a young fairy with tiny wings stumbles into the greenhouse.

Frame of Mind 8

“I’m back.”

When she returned, Tsutako-san was not alone.

“Pardon me.”

Shouko-chan hesitantly entered into the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion. Almost as though she’d heard the gossip that had been said about her just before.

“I ran into her not long ago, so I dragged her along. Ah, Mami-san.”

Tsutako-san noticed her classmate and said, “Gokigenyou,” to her. After responding to the greeting in kind, Mami-san looked at Shouko-chan and nodded slightly to her. As though to say, “Sorry about before.”

However Shouko-chan didn’t notice this at all, instead she fidgeted with her fingers as her gaze darted around the room. Just like Mami-san had said, there were brand new, oversized band-aids visible on the palms of her hands.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling out of place, surrounded by second-years?”

Shimako-san asked as she pulled an empty chair out from the table, offering it to Shouko-chan, who seemed a bit taken aback.

“Ah, no. Sorry. I’m just a bit nervous being here in the Rose Mansion.”

“Wha – ?”

Yumi called out instinctively. Because it was so contrary to her expectations. After all, this wasn’t Shouko-chan’s first time in this room, and she’d kept her cool remarkably well for a first-year the last time she’d been there.

Shouko-chan had definitely changed since last time.

“Here, have some tea.”

“Ah, thank-you... Oh, it’s hot.”

She then placed her finger through the handle of the cup as though she were about to lift it to drink, stared idly at a spot on the table, and repeated a question again and again as though she wasn’t following the conversation when someone talked to her. It could be summed up in a single word as ‘absent-mindedness.’

It seemed unlikely that she had been unaware of the pain from the grazes on her hands when she had dealt with Katsura-san in a brisk, secretary-like fashion (since she had already been injured at that point). Well, Tsutako-san couldn’t just leave her alone, so had to bring her along – that was understandable.

“Ah, that’s right.”

Yumi took the roll of film out of her pocket and handed it to Tsutako-san.

“What should we do with this?”

“What’s that?”

Mami-san asked with a great deal of interest, not knowing the story.

“Earlier today I was given this by an unknown first-year. Because it’s got Takeshima Tsutako written on it, see. But Tsutako-san says it’s not hers.”

“Well, that’s interesting. A bit of a mystery. I can tell by their faces that Yoshino-san and Shimako-san have taken an interest in it too.”

“Right?”

Just as she was saying this, a voice unexpectedly called out from outside the group of boisterous second-years.

“Umm, you should take it to lost property.”

That was a surprise. It was Shouko-chan. A little while ago, she hadn't been participating in the conversation at all, but now she seemed to have lost her absent-mindedness. She'd spoken quite loudly too.

“Well, that was the plan.”

Tsutako-san said, and Yumi, Shimako-san and Mami-san all nodded in agreement. There was only one second-year who was shaking her head.

“But if the lost property office finds the owner, we'll probably never find out who it was.”

It was Yoshino-san.

“Well, that would only be if the person in question asked them not to say anything, right?”

It's not like the lost property office would refuse to give the item back if the owner didn't open themselves up to public gossip. Probably.

“Hmph. So we'd never know the truth? Isn't that awful? Even though we went to all the effort of picking it up.”

“...”

Literally speaking, Yoshino-san, it was the group of three unnamed first-years that had picked it up, not you. Furthermore, you weren't even the person they entrusted it to. – Things would have taken a turn for the worse if Yumi were to poke at Yoshino-san by saying something like that, so she kept silent. Everyone else was undoubtedly thinking a similar retort too. The silence of “...” was proof of that.

“At the very least, Tsutako-san has a right to know, doesn't she? See, they're defrauding her by using her name.”

“...”

So transparent, Yoshino-san. Your real intention was to secretly listen in if they did happen to tell Tsutako-san.

“A name alone doesn’t make it fraud.”

Was Tsutako-san’s opinion. Well that was true. They didn’t have any proof that there were no other students with the same name at school.

“Then, what? You’re still clinging to the theory that someone else has the same first and last name as you?”

Yoshino-san laughed loudly, highlighting the fact that Takeshima Tsutako was hardly a common name.

“There are other possibilities.”

Tsutako-san said, asserting that it was better to leave it to the proper authorities.

“But the lost property office aren’t magicians, so they’re not going to know the owner if we just hand it over. They’ll be in the same boat as us. And since it has the name Takeshima Tsutako written on it, they’ll match it to Takeshima Tsutako-san in the second-year pine group and won’t search any further, right?”

“And if they do?”

Yumi asked. What happened to the items in lost property whose owner couldn’t be found? It’s not like it could be sold at the bazaar during the school festival once its custody period had elapsed. It wasn’t a new sheet or towel.

“In the end, one of the teachers might take it to a photo processing shop and get it developed.”

Unlike other lost items like a handkerchief or a hair-clip, a roll of film held information inside it.

“In that case, it should be fine for Tsutako-san to go ahead and do the job of developing the film, no?”

“Absolutely not.”

Tsutako-san flatly rejected Yoshino-san’s suggestion. Even without getting into the photographer’s code of practice, the moral and ethical questions around that behavior would rule it out. It was a matter of the owner’s privacy.

“I agree.”

Everyone except for Yoshino-san concurred with Tsutako-san, and Yoshino-san turned away and said, “I was just putting it out there.”

“Ah, I think we should hand it over to lost property quickly. It’s possible that the person who lost it has already reported it as missing.”

Shouko-chan said.

“Oh, I see. The longer we hold on to it, the longer it will probably take to get back to its rightful owner.”

Even so, school had already finished for the day. There was no guarantee that there would be anyone in lost property.

“We’ll take it first thing tomorrow morning.”

“That would be best.”

The decision was made by majority rule.

But still, the film remained in front of them. Thoughts about it filled Yumi’s mind, perhaps exacerbated by the notion that this was a mystery they were unlikely to be able to solve by themselves.

“I wonder what kind of person dropped this.”

Yumi’s words were met with a unanimous, “Hmmm,” and contemplation.

“It’s hopeless. Whatever I imagine, Tsutako-san’s face is the only one that comes to mind.”

Mami-san said, then sighed and flopped down over the table. It could belong to someone from a broad range of groups: students, teachers, clerks, nuns, but it sounded like they all ended up with Tsutako-san’s face in Mami-san’s mind.

“Are you sure it’s not Tsutako-san’s?”

Yoshino-san sought confirmation once more. Apparently neither she nor Mami-san could exclude Tsutako-san from the equation that easily. Yumi was having the same problem herself.

“That’s what she said.”

Still, the assumption that it was Tsutako-san’s was hard to dislodge.

“Give it a rest. I told you it’s not mine.”

The other second-years looked skeptically at Tsutako-san, who had risen from her seat. Looking at her behavior, it was easy to judge whether or not she was lying. Her eyes were trustworthy.

Still, it seemed rather farfetched to think that there was no connection between Tsutako-san and the ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ written on the roll of film.

And yet, Tsutako-san maintained that it was not hers. How to resolve this apparent contradiction?

“I guess there could be another Tsutako-san.”

It wasn’t this Tsutako-san who dropped the film, but the other one. Which was why she had no memory of it.

“Basically it’s the doppelganger theory then.”

“Doppelganger?”

Tsutako-san had been looking disinterested, but the moment she heard the word ‘doppelganger,’ her face lit up, like a switch had been thrown.

“Ah, a doppelganger is like this.”

“No need to explain. I know what one is.”

While she said this, Tsutako-san reached into her paper bag and rustled through the envelopes of photographs until she finally found the one she was after.

“I just remembered it when you said ‘doppelganger.’”

She took a single photo out of the envelope and held it up in front of Yumi.

“Take a look at this.”

— She said.

The Doppelganger Story

~ Let me pass, let me pass. ~

~ What is this narrow pathway here? ~

~ It's the narrow pathway of Maria-sama. ~

~ Please allow me to pass through. ~

~ Those without good reason shall not pass. ~⁷

Translation courtesy of Wikipedia:
<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/T%C5%8Dryanse> This is the traffic light melody mentioned in 'April Deja-vu.' The Tenjin Shrine from the original has been replaced with Maria-sama.

(– hey, wait.)

Minato pulled herself up, as though she'd been singing aloud and not just in her head.

“Which club are you from?”

The security guard seemed gentle, but his expression said he wasn't about to compromise when it came to his job, as he looked at Minato and waited for a response.

“Err, it's the manga club ... ”

Minato said as she reached into her bag, pulled out a bath towel and used it to wipe away the sweat running down her face.

“The manga club? Ahh – ”

The security guard looked towards the last group he had just let in.

“Yeah, that’s right. Those are my friends. I just fell a bit behind. Hey, sempai, Ryouko-sama.”

Minato called out, waving wildly at her friends that were steadily receding down the narrow pathway of Maria-sama, err, the path lined with ginkgo trees, entreating them to come and help her.

She was being checked on the way in, even though they’d only gone off-campus to go to a public bathhouse as part of their on-campus summer vacation camp. Since there were young ladies staying at school, obviously there had to be someone keeping a strict watch so that no suspicious people could enter the campus. The security guard had the important job of keeping track of the number of girls that left, which club they belonged to, as well as the time they left and the time they returned.

Incidentally, since Minato was wearing jeans and a T-shirt as well as having short hair and a stick figure body, she looked like a boy at first glance, but she was a 100% genuine student of Lillian’s Girls Academy. Just as she was realizing the extent that her identity was normally proven by her school uniform and school ID card, the security guard said:

“That’s odd. I’ve confirmed that the manga club had eight people leaving, and eight people returning.”

While the security guard shook his head as he held the notebook in one hand, her friends had noticed the commotion and returned to the gate.

“What’s the matter, Minato-chan?”

“That was cruel of you, sempai. Running off and leaving me behind.”

Minato complained to the club president, Ryouko-sama, who was the first one to arrive.

“Left you behind? You were with us just a minute ago, Minato-chan.”

Ryouko-sama said, seeking confirmation from the other club members on the camp. One, two, three, ... there were six uncertain nods of agreement,

excluding Ryouko-sama.

“Just a minute ago?”

Minato asked.

“When we went through the gate, right?”

“Huh?”

If she’d been with them when they entered, then she wouldn’t have been stopped, alone, at the gate.

In the end, the security guard checked the numbers once more, and there were eight, so this time around Minato was allowed to enter with the rest of the group.

“Well, that is strange. Last time around, the security guard counted eight people.”

“What could that mean?”

Taki-sama, the club vice-president, asked.

“The only thing I can think is that there are two Minato-chans.”

After saying that, Ryouko-sama turned to face Minato, grinning broadly.

“Watch out, Minato-chan. If you see your doppelganger, you’ll die in a couple of days.”

– Geeze, give me a break.

* *

“So, why did you fall behind, Minato-chan?”

Ryouko-sama asked, as she was stuffing her face with a piping-hot deep-fried croquette. Their dinner menu was that, plus a side-salad, pickled vegetables, miso soup and a donburi meat and rice dish. At home, rice was usually a side-dish in a smaller bowl, but strangely enough, they ate a lot of the larger, donburi rice dishes on camp.

“We passed a stone monument on the way back, and I stopped to read its inscription. I called out, asking you to wait up.”

Minato answered, somewhat peevishly. If they had waited, then she wouldn’t have been stopped by the security guard.

“I didn’t hear you.”

At the time, Ryouko-sama had been walking in front, talking loudly to Taki-sama about their evening dinner menu, so she may not have heard.

The meals for students participating in on-campus camps were provided by the university’s cafeteria. It was the beginning of August and there were a number of other clubs having their camps at the same time, so the dining hall was quite lively.

“So, what was written on the Kōshin pillar?”⁸

The Japanese Wikipedia has some pictures of these at <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ja/wiki/%E5%BA%9A%E7%94%B3%E5%A1%94> and the English Wikipedia has some basic information about the beliefs at <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/K%C5%8Dshin>

“The Kōshin pillar said hey, wait, how did you know it was a Kōshin pillar?”

“We went to the same public bathhouse during our camp last year too. Didn’t the old pillar look like it’d be good material?”

Listening to Ryouko-sama's explanation, Minato was crestfallen and hung her head in shame.

"No way, I was even thinking of using it as a hint in the manga I'm writing for the school festival."

Minato had been scooped by her senior. Simply because she had the disadvantage of being born later.

"So use it?"

"Huh? But weren't you going to?"

"I thought about it, but I can't really see myself using it. And since my manga's going to be a love romance set in the French royal palace, a Kōshin pillar wouldn't fit. What do the rest of you think?"

Ryouko-sama asked the other second-years. Incidentally, there were only first- and second-years participating in their camp.

"It wouldn't go well with my parallel universe fantasy either."

Then the 'boys-love' specialist Taki-sama shook her head too.

"I've tried to use it a couple of times too, but never got anywhere. When writing boys-love, I've wanted to use a setting like our neighbors, Hanadera Academy. But I always get frustrated when I'm writing it. Because it doesn't feel real. There's nothing I can do about that, I'll never know what things are really like over there."

Then the second-years started saying some ridiculous sounding statements, like, "I wonder if it's true that they all wear loincloths for swimming lessons at Hanadera," and, "Aren't the teachers all Buddhist monks?" and everyone got quite excited.

But as excited as a group of girls got talking about an all-boys school, the opposite, ie. a group of boys talking about an all-girls school, would surely get far more excited.

Minato stayed out of this derailed discussion, and Ryouko-sama said to her:

“So you see, Minato-chan, we’ll hand over the Kōshin pillar to you and your horror manga. Oh, hey, why don’t you mix that together with the doppelganger?”

“Huh...”

“Yeah, one day protagonist M was walking past the Kōshin pillar on the way to school, when she was stopped by the security guard. ‘Hey, didn’t you just walk past here a minute ago?’ he says.”

“Ooh, that does sound good.”

The other students had reached a lull in their conversation about boys schools, and so they jokingly intervened in her conversation.

“Oh, what’s wrong? You look so gloomy, Minato-chan.”

“Well, if the protagonist sees their doppelganger they’ll die after a few days, right? Using myself as the model is a bit ... ”

“It’ll be fine, they don’t have to see their doppelganger at all.”

There didn’t seem to be any basis for her statement that “It’ll be fine,” but Ryouko-sama was definitely full of confidence. Nonetheless.

“Can you even call it a doppelganger then? Wouldn’t it just be another student that looks like her wandering around ... ?”

“Well, that could be fun too.”

“But even if it was fun.”

It wouldn’t be a horror manga, Minato thought.

* * *

“... I’m bored.”

Someone muttered as they lay on tatami mats spread out across half the classroom.

“Nights without TV sure are long.”

That was the switch, and it was followed by a rapid succession of voices saying things like, “There’s nothing to do,” and, “I should have brought a game.”

For the first and second nights of the camp, the boredom itself had been interesting, but by the third night it felt like the boredom was just boring. They’d lost interest in sitting on their futons and playing cards for a second successive night.

Normally Minato would draw manga when she was bored, but having had plenty of time to do that during the day, she’d had enough of her beloved club activity.

No matter what the club activity, they were probably all pretty much the same. Consequently, the lights went out at 10pm. If they were going to be bored, they might as well sleep. But it was shortly before 9pm. They’d spread their futons out early since they had nothing else to do, but there was still over an hour left until lights-out.

It was in that languid atmosphere that the club president, Ryouko-sama, stood up and said:

“Alright, let’s have a test of courage.”

“A test of courage?”

“You’re bored, right? Everyone on your feet, stand up.”

With Ryouko-sama prodding at them the upset club members reluctantly stood up. But their eyes glistened faintly.

“The location is the auditorium. Well, it starts at the five or six steps in the stairway that lead up the auditorium. I’m going to leave this there.”

As she said that, Ryouko-sama held up a lens with film attached, a.k.a. a disposable camera. She must have bought it at the convenience store, when she stopped in there on the way back from the public bathhouse.

“You have to pick it up, then go to the front of the auditorium and use the camera to take a picture of yourself as proof, then put it back on the stairway.”

“But why the *stairway*— ⁹

In Japanese, stairway (階段) is pronounced the same as ghost story (怪談) and discussion (会談). Minato stops because she realizes the terrible pun Ryouko has made.

Minato got that far before she figured it out.

“N, no way!?”

“You got it. That’s exactly what it is. The *stairway* and *ghost stories* are connected. If you encountered a ghost there, we could *discuss* it – wouldn’t that just be perfect?”

” _ ”

If she only wanted to make a bad pun, there was no need to go all the way to the auditorium. There were a bunch of stairways in the school building itself.

“Putting it in the school building would be boring, right? Anyway, pick a piece of paper. Two people to a group. I’d like everyone to go one at a time, but we wouldn’t be finished before lights-out.”

This time around Ryouko-sama held out strips of paper about 1cm wide. The papers had the letter A, B or C written on them, which only became visible after they were drawn. She'd been doing something secretive over at a desk in the corner just before, and apparently this was it.

“Oh, there aren't enough.”

There were eight club members participating in the camp. But there were only six pieces of paper.

“I'm going alone as the vanguard. And Minato-chan will go, alone, as the rear guard.”

“Hey. Alone?”

“You're scared? Even though you're drawing a horror manga?”

“I draw it because I'm scared. On the flip side, if I ever was in a scary situation, I'd never be able to draw it.”

“I see. I choose to draw boys-love because it's something that I'll never be able to experience myself.”

“That's exactly it, Taki-sama. Ten points for you.”

Without pausing to admire Minato, the other six girls hurriedly drew pieces of paper, assigning themselves to a team.

“Ahh.”

Having missed her chance to get in on the draw, Minato had the misfortune of going alone.

“Everyone okay? Make sure you take a photo with yourselves in it. There'll be a penalty for any club members who aren't in the photos when they're developed.”

“Awww.”

“Well, what were you expecting? That you could just wander around the school building for a bit, come back and say that you’d been there?”

“Have some faith in me.”

As the older girls laughed, it was obvious that they didn’t consider skulking around the school building to be a test of courage on the same level as going to the auditorium.

“Even if you don’t lie, the penalty still applies if you’re not in the photos. This camera can take 27 photos. Basic math tells us there’s three photos per person. ... Right, as a bonus prize for going by herself, Minato can take five photos.”

“Umm ... that leaves one photo remaining.”

It may have been inconsequential but Minato was troubled by it, so she asked.

$$27 - 7 \times 3 - 1 \times 5 = 1$$

Minato smiled and said, “You don’t get it, huh.”

“Always leave one candle lit when you’re doing the Gathering of 100 Supernatural Tales.” [10](#)

https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Hyakumonogatari_Kaidankai

“Huh?”

“Terrible things happen when the final candle is blown out. You’ve never heard of this?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

It was a popular subject in horror manga. The hundred stories that must never all be told. Much like the urban legends of the ghost schools.

“So it’s up to you, Minato-chan, to ensure the last photograph remains.”

“Alright.”

Minato responded gravely. The 100 Supernatural Tales were that scary.

“Okay, I’m off.”

Ryouko-sama gleefully departed. Surely she’d be better suited to writing a horror manga than a royal romance?

So then. Ryouko-sama returned after just ten minutes.

“It sure is lonely out there by yourself.”

She said, smiling brightly. Poking fun at Minato, who would have to face the test of courage on her own later. Was this person a sadist?

When Ryouko-sama arrived back Group A set out, and they were gone about 15 minutes. Since they went as a group of two, they were probably chatting as they walked and then posing for their photographs, which added to their time. They looked pretty relaxed when they said, “We’re back.”

Group B were quick. They took about seven minutes and when they returned their faces were ashen.

“Well, we heard a strange noise – ”

It looked like they both started sprinting after being surprised. But they didn’t want to face the penalty either, so they held it together long enough to take their photos. It’d be interesting to see what kind of photos they took.

Group C returned, with an expression that differed from both Group A’s relaxed look and Group B’s petrified look.

Having just returned, they questioned the other two groups.

“How many photos did you lot take?”

Before anyone had a chance to ask why, Taki-sama from Group C continued angrily.

“When we went to take our photos, eighteen shots had already been taken. Even if you’d used all your photos, there should only have been fifteen taken.”

Taking more than your share of photographs was a clear violation of the rules.

“If we’d taken our full six then that wouldn’t have left five remaining for last placed Minato-chan, so we restrained ourselves to only three.”

“Hold on a minute.”

Ryouko-sama stopped her.

“I only took one photo.”

Group B and Group C continued in the same vein.

“We took four photos.”

“We took six between us, but ... ?”

Taking their statements at face value, one, four and six totaled to eleven. So who took the missing seven photographs?

” ... The counter could be broken.”

An irrational idea popped into her head and Minato desperately fought to drive it out.

“On a camera from one of the industry’s leading manufacturers? That’s a bit troubling.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. We’ll know when I get the film developed.”

“But we don’t know now.”

“We don’t have to know now. Go on, off you go.”

Ryouko-sama smiled as she ushered Minato out of the classroom. –
Ryouko-sama’s sadism had been confirmed.

Just as Minato had expected, the school was a scary place at night.

The classrooms being used by groups having on-campus camps, and the hallways around them, were brilliantly lit and lively, but one step outside that area and a dark and silent world opened up. It was a warm and sultry night, but it also felt oddly cool.

Fortunately, her route didn’t take her past the science labs, but she still had a bit of a shock when she unthinkingly walked past the school infirmary.

“... Eek!”

The poster of the human body that hung on the corridor wall looked especially ominous in the dim light.

(Even in the school building, you can still have a proper test of courage.)

Clutching her chest, Minato unsteadily advanced. After going out the emergency exit, the sky was expansive and the stars were distant. Even so, it wasn’t as dark as she had expected because the outside lights shone down here and there. Under normal circumstances they were probably turned off after the students had gone home for the day, but were left running all night while the on-campus camps were taking place.

The tree branches swayed noisily.

(If you look closely, everything has a rational explanation.)

Minato walked on, repeating this within her head. The words were a charm she used to prevent herself from breaking into a run like Group B.

After repeating this to herself countless times, Minato arrived at the auditorium. The entrance to Milk Hall, which was in the same building, gaped wide open and the inky blackness seemed to beckon her into another world.

(Don't look at it, don't look at it.)

In her mind, Minato applauded Ryouko-sama for skillfully choosing this downward sloping staircase for the photography location. There were countless other stairways around the grounds, but because this one was delving down into the ground it made it many times more frightening.

Minato hurried past the entrance to Milk Hall and around to the front of the auditorium, where she had to take the photo. The camera had been in the middle of the staircase and very easy to spot.

“Alright.”

All she had to do was take a photo of herself using the camera and return and her job would be complete. Minato let out a sigh of relief, but then she casually glanced at the film counter and gulped.

” ... No way.”

The number showing on the display was 2. In other words, 25 photographs had been taken. But Group C said that they had left Minato enough film to take five photos. In which case, the display should have read 5.

“Ahaha.”

The camera had to be broken, after all. Minato momentarily laughed, but rather than cheering her up it seemed to deepen her unease.

(But what if it isn't broken?)

Something had been pressing the shutter. She felt a shiver run down her spine and didn't want to think about it any more. She didn't want to think about it, but at any rate, it only left her one shot to work with.

Failure was not an option. After checking the flash setting, Minato turned the lens to face herself. From that position, her face should be visible. She was a bit concerned, but since she was both the photographer and the subject there was nothing she could do about it.

(In five, four, three, two ...)

Just then.

“Would you like some help?”

“Aaaaargh!?”

Surprised by the voice that suddenly called out to her from behind, Minato flailed her arms wildly. If she'd only flailed her arms it would have been fine, but by instinct she ...

Click.

“Ah”

She'd clenched down on the shutter.

“I'm stupid, stupid, stupid.”

Even though that had been her last chance. She was willing to bet that her face hadn't been captured in that shot.

“What the hell were you doing, scaring me like that!”

Minato turned around. At that time she still thought it was someone from her club.

“I'm sorry.”

The moment she saw the contrite looking girl Minato was again surprised, but for a different reason. She almost doubled over from horror.

“I didn’t mean to alarm you. But you looked like you were having trouble taking the photo by yourself, so I called out to you. Oh my.”

The person smiling amiably at Minato was herself.

Doppelganger. If you catch sight of your double, then you’ll die a couple of days later.

“Don’t we look alike?”

“Look alike... ahh.”

When Minato heard this, she came to her senses.

Their height, slender body type and short hair were both exactly the same, but they only looked like each other because on closer inspection they were distinct human beings. They may come from the same genetic lineage, but their faces weren’t completely identical. And their voices differed in both timbre and tone.

“We’re even wearing the same color T-shirts.”

“Ahh, this.”

Minato plucked at the hem of her T-shirt.

“My mother bought it for me, saying that since I look like a boy I should at least wear a pink T-shirt.”

Minato found herself wondering why she was telling a stranger this, but found herself unable to stop.

“But I don’t think it really suits me.”

Minato probably made this excuse because, although they were both wearing jeans and a T-shirt, it clearly looked better on the other girl.

“Not at all. You look so cute. The pink matches your voice.”

She said it with no trace of malice whatsoever, and smiled so sweetly, that Minato's sense of inferiority was blown away. In truth, Minato envied her voice just as much as her figure. She yearned for a voice that was just a touch lower, like that of the girl in front of her.

"I'm Minato. And you are?"

"Ariko."

Minato felt that they could be friends, and it wasn't just because they looked like each other.

"By the way, Ariko-san, what's a girl like you doing all alone in a place like this?"

"Oh. You're asking me that, but you're doing the same thing, aren't you Minato-san?"

"So you're on a test of courage?"

"Exactly. But the people in your group only have to take a picture of themselves, right? That's nice."

"So it's worse for you then, Ariko-san?"

"More or less. You've heard of a scavenger hunt, right? It's kind of like that, the first-years have to go out and fetch things that the seniors decree."

"Ohh, that's horrible."

"But, I adore that senior."

Minato found her resistance drooping limply after this unexpected statement from Ariko.

"... Is she your onee-sama?"

Minato asked without thinking, and was answered with a shake of the head.

“It looks like they prefer one of my friends.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

From just that brief exchange it was obvious that Ariko’s club wasn’t the same happy-go-lucky place as the manga club. Well, there were all kinds.

“It’s okay, I’m fine with it. Setting that aside, I’ll take the photo for you. Hand me the camera.”

Ariko held out her hand for the camera. Minato nodded in agreement, but couldn’t bring herself to hand it over.

“What’s the matter? There’s still film right?”

“There is, but ... ”

Ariko turned pale when Minato explained that the last piece of film was like the final candle in the 100 Supernatural Tales.

“So that stuff-up was your only shot, Minato-san? I’m so sorry. How can I apologize?”

“I said it’s okay. It was my lack of guts that made me surprised by your voice.”

Minato said, self-deprecatingly, but Ariko didn’t laugh.

“What happens if you don’t take your photograph?”

“There’s a penalty.”

“And how many people are there after you?”

“I’m the last one.”

Thereupon Ariko clapped her hands together.

“Is that all? Then you might as well take your photo, right? Use the last piece of film.”

“But what about the 100 Supernatural Tales?”

“It’ll be fine. It’s not a candle, you know.”

“But what if my soul’s sucked – ”

“Minato-san, what century are you living in?”

Ariko laughed so hard she clutched her stomach. After laughing for a short while she suddenly said, “I’m thirsty.” Before Minato started to look around for the closest drinking fountain, Ariko raised her index finger.

“Say, do you want a juice? My treat.”

“Huh? No, I’m fine.”

“You don’t have to be so restrained. It’s a goodwill offering. I wanted to get some strawberry milk, but since it’s summer vacation I don’t suppose they’d have any.”

“That’s what you’d think. But I saw our club president drinking one this morning.”

“Ooh, where’d she get it from? You have to show me.”

“Show you? She got it from Milk Hall, of course.”

Minato pointed. The only place at school that sold strawberry milk was Milk Hall. Naturally, Milk Hall was closed at this time of night, but to be more precise it was the vending machine outside of Milk Hall.

“Alright then, let’s go.”

Ariko walked off and Minato followed after her.

“Wait, where are you going? It’s this way – didn’t I just say it was at Milk Hall.”

Ariko, who had overshot the entrance, hastily stopped.

“Ahaha, I’m just a bit absent-minded.”

“.....”

Were there really any students who were so absent-minded that they’d mistake where Milk Hall was? What if she was being led astray by a trickster raccoon or fox? These were the kind of thoughts Minato was having as she followed Ariko, who was skipping happily down the stairs in front of Milk Hall. She even seemed completely undaunted by the darkness.

“Here it is. Thank-you, Minato-san.”

Ariko danced rapturously as she fed the coins into the vending machine, then handed one of the two packs that it spat out to Minato.

“Sorry, I forgot to ask what you wanted, so I got you the same thing as me, Minato-san.”

“That’s okay. Thanks.”

The red ‘sold-out’ light was glowing next to the button for strawberry milk. It looked like they got the last two.

Even though she was supposedly thirsty, Ariko didn’t puncture the milk carton with the straw.

“Say, how about a photo to capture this feeling. One with the both of us in it. Let’s go back to where we were before.”

Ariko took Minato by the hand and climbed the stairs, going back outside. And like that, she jumped for joy in front of the auditorium.

“Hold the strawberry milk up beside your face. See, it matches the color of our T-shirts, we look like twins.”

Ariko held the camera up to face them, as they stood cheek-to-cheek. Minato posed, still silent. It no longer mattered to her whether or not Ariko was some kind of spirit animal. The photograph would probably be good inspiration for a future manga, but she was also partially resigned to her circumstances.

“You’re sure? It really is the last piece of film.”

“It’s okay. I know how to use the camera. Alright, here we go. Three, two.”

Just then.

“Minato-chaaaaaan.”

From far away, a voice called out her name.

“Wah.”

Click.

“Ah.”

Just as the camera shook wildly, the light of the flash and the sound of the shutter enveloped them.

“I’m so sorry. I even said I knew what I was doing, and it ended up like this ...”

As Ariko earnestly apologized, the voice from before could be heard coming from the school building.

“It’s okay. You bought me the strawberry milk as a pre-payment.”

Minato said, laughing.

“In that case, I should go.”

“Okay.”

Minato nodded and Arika tossed the camera back to her.

“See you later.”

“Yeah, later.”

At the time, Minato didn't think to question why Arika ran off in the direction of the ginkgo-tree lined path, rather than towards the school building where the camps were taking place. Perhaps a part of her thought that Arika really was an entirely different type of being.

“Minato-chan.”

Minato was brought back to earth by the cries of Ryouko-sama that were getting steadily louder.

“When 10:00 came around and you still weren't back I got worried. I'm so glad you're fine.”

“I am not fine. I wasn't able to take my photo all alone.”

“Oh, my. Then I suppose some kind of penalty is in order for you then.”

Ryouko-sama said, as she took the camera from Minato's hand.

“Speaking of which, what is the penalty?”

“I haven't really had time to think of one. Let's see. Be my petit soeur. How about that?”

” ... And you're okay with that even if I saw my doppelganger and will die in a couple of days?”

“Really? If you're going to die, at least wait until after you've finished your manuscript for the school festival.”

“You're more concerned about that than my life?”

“Hahaha.”

Ryouko-sama hugged Minato around the shoulder and laughed.

“So why do you have that strawberry milk?”

“A spirit fox gave it to me.”

Minato responded completely seriously.

“Say Minato-chan, wouldn’t a folktale be better than a horror manga?”

Ryouko-sama said, looking fondly at Minato.

* * * *

Come the next morning, the strawberry milk hadn’t changed into anything else and remained obviously strawberry milk.

The film was taken to be developed, which was completed the following day, so they were all able to verify its contents while still on camp.

The final result was that no-one had to undergo the penalty.

It was determined that Minato appeared in the photos taken immediately after those of Group C. A set of three photos, in varying poses.

But Minato had indeed failed to take a photograph.

Because that was Ariko. Nobody said anything, so Minato allowed everyone to continue under the impression that those three photographs were of her.

In the end, they never determined who took the few photographs interspersed between the club member’s photos. They must have been taken by a human, but why would someone take photos of trees and buildings?

The seniors in the club may have done it as a way of making Minato frightened but, if so, that was a pretty low act.

“Hang on, this isn’t you, Minato-chan.”

Ryouko-sama suddenly said, out of the blue, one day about six months later. That was when Minato decided to become her petit soeur.

The true identity of Arika remained a mystery. Minato thought about it from time to time. Her feelings about it were conflicting, she wanted to know but she also thought it might be better off left alone.

“Hey, Tsutako-san. This is a spirit photograph.”

When second-year came around and Minato was placed in the same class as Takeshima Tsutako-san, she showed her the picture of Arika.

But the only comment the unfocussed photograph elicited from Tsutako-san was, “I couldn’t call it a good photo, even if I was trying to flatter you.”

Frame of Mind 9

“Take a look at this.”

It was an out-of-focus photo. It was of a different quality to the rest of the photographs that had so far appeared on the table, and a fairly poor effort considering the photographer was Tsutako-san.

“Do you know who this is?”

“Huh?”

There were all kinds of things she wanted to ask, but Tsutako-san shut her down by saying, “Without prejudice,” so Yumi reluctantly stared at the photograph. No-one other than Yumi could see the photograph, and they watched and waited for her response.

“It looks like someone I know ... but it’s not all that clear so I’m not sure. It’s dark, so it’s hard to tell for sure, but it looks like it was taken at our school. But they’re wearing street clothes... and the date ... that was during summer holidays, the year before last. So, that’s not right, I guess.”

“What isn’t?”

Tsutako-san asked. Meaning, What isn’t right?

“I must be mistaking them for someone else. It’s not the person I thought it was.”

Yumi held out the photograph to return it, but Tsutako-san pushed it back towards her, saying “Take another look.”

“Without prejudice.”

Tsutako-san repeated and, once more, Yumi reset and looked only at the face.

“It looks like a friend of mine.”

“They don’t go to our school, right?”

Based on that, Tsutako-san probably knew the person she was thinking of too. Yumi agreed, saying, “Right,” and Tsutako-san mumbled, “That’s what I thought.”

“What is?”

“Actually, this is something Minato-san gave me.”

The name of Yumi’s classmate burst forth.

“Oh? Ah, right. So this is Minato-san then?”

A slender body and short hair. A boyish figure teamed with a pink T-shirt may seem like a mismatch at first glance, but having heard her sweet voice it all became clear.

“That’s what you’d think from looking at it.”

So was Tsutako-san saying that that wasn’t the case? That was probably why she’d been so insistent about saying, “Without prejudice.”

“But she told me that this was a spirit photograph.”

“A spirit photograph?”

“That the photograph was proof of her doppelganger. At the time, I thought it just an out-of-focus shot that she’d taken of herself, so I laughed it off. But since last Autumn it’s been kind of blurry.”

“Blurry?”

“Yeah. Like the photo.”

And as a result, she’d apparently been left wondering if this really was a photograph that Minato-san had taken of herself. Indeed, it seemed like

Tsutako-san had started to reflect on it. At first she'd overlooked it, but now she seemed convinced that it was someone other than who she had initially thought it was.

"Not always, but occasionally I'd think about it. Then, suddenly, I had a flash of inspiration the other day. Like things came into focus. So I thought I'd ask you to take a look, Yumi-san."

"I see."

Indeed. After all, she'd been a lot closer to the person that Tsutako-san seemed to have in mind than Tsutako-san had been. At least, that's what Yumi thought.

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san both had a look at the photograph, but didn't say anything. Since Tsutako-san had specifically mentioned Yumi, and since the subject was someone in street clothes who wasn't from their school, they probably assumed it was someone they'd never met.

Therefore, Yumi thought she should keep this to herself too. If her reasoning was correct, and this photo came to light, then that person would be in a bit, no make that a lot, of trouble. Because it meant they'd crept into a girls school in the middle of the night while there were school camps taking place.

The spitting image of the boyish-looking girl Minato-san was a girlish-looking boy.

It was probably forbidden that he should appear on Lillian's school grounds without formal permission or, at the very least, wearing his school uniform.

Still, it was possible that that was nothing more than Yumi and Tsutako-san's imaginations running wild, and that it really was just a photograph of Minato-san. Minato-san was a member of the manga club, so she may tell strange stories as material for her manga.

Therefore, it was a complete coincidence that the student council members from their neighbors at Hanadera Academy came and helped out for the

Lillian school festival in autumn of the previous year. Tsutako-san's talk about the blurriness coming into focus was all in her imagination. Thinking about it that way, there was no problem whatsoever.

"Which reminds me. Was there something you wanted to see me about?"

Tsutako-san asked Mami-san. Shouko-chan may have mentioned something on the way over.

"There was something, but now it looks like it won't happen."

Mami-san said.

"Won't happen?"

"I was going to ask you to take photos of the Valentines Day dates like last year, but I've thought better of it."

"Ah, about that."

Tsutako-san said that she wouldn't be able to do it because she'd already made other arrangements. Hearing that, Yumi remembered that the dates were scheduled for next Sunday and that Tsutako-san was coming to school that day to take photos of the tennis club. It was all organized a short time ago.

"But I can't let you go empty-handed, since you came all the way here to see me."

Tsutako-san reached into her bag and pulled out an envelope which she held up to Mami-san, saying, "Here you go."

"Use whichever ones you want in the 'Lillian Kwaraban.' All the people in the photos gave their permission."

"Ah —. Thanks, that's a huge help."

The envelope had 'Valentines Event' written on it. Inside would undoubtedly be a bunch of photographs of various girls taken by Tsutako-

san as she moved around during the treasure hunt.

(Hmm? Inside would surely be ... ?)

Yumi tilted her head. Just now, she'd been struck by something.

Tsutako-san called out, "Ah." She'd probably realized it just before Yumi. Everyone else had probably noticed it too.

"The words written on it don't necessarily have to be the owner's name."

"... Right."

Like the 'Valentines Event' written on the envelope, they could be used to index what was contained within.

"Which means."

The photos contained in the film were – . Everyone looked at Tsutako-san. It had been an oversight to not consider this possibility before now. That Tsutako-san, who was inseparable from her camera outside of class and never hesitated in pressing then shutter button when there was a photo opportunity, had been captured on film.

Tsutako-san's initial reaction was disbelief. But after about five seconds her expression changed to one that said, "Maybe."

Tsutako-san's gaze slowly passed over them. Before it reached its target, one person dropped her head, as though unable to stand the tension.

"I'm sorry!"

"Huh? Shouko-chan!?"

The three future Roses plus Mami-san cried out in unison.

"I thought as much."

Tsutako-san alone had a grim smile on her face, as though she'd finally figured out some difficult puzzle.

“This is yours, Shouko-chan.”

She said, holding the film canister with ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ written on it between her thumb and index finger.

A Roll of Film

The characteristic smell of the permanent maker accompanied its squeaking sound.

The words I wrote on the roll of film (27 shots) after I'd taken it out of its box were 'Takeshima Tsutako.'

All I'd done was write the katakana that made up her name, but it still made my heart flutter a little. Who knows what would have happened if I'd written out the oh-so-familiar kanji form of her name, instead of giving up on that idea due to lack of space. My heart might have gone from fluttering to pounding, and I may have fallen to my knees.

That'd be no good, no good at all. This was still part of the toilet block, after all, even if it was cleaned every day. Leaning against the wall would be about the limit.

And as for why my heart was fluttering, and why I was holed up, working away in a deserted bathroom after school, all those questions are answered by the one reason.

And that reason is because I am not 'Takeshima Tsutako.' My real name is Naitou Shouko.

And even though I am not Takeshima Tsutako, I wrote Takeshima Tsutako and I did not follow it with the honorific '-sama.' I suppose that would account for the fluttering heart. It's almost the same feeling you get when you write your name next to your bosom buddy's, or you write your first name followed by the last name of a guy you like. Ahh, that's so embarrassing.

It all started with a single statement from a third-year onee-sama (senior).

“Shouko-chan, you’ll be displaying something for the photography exhibit, right?”

“Huh? No, don’t be absurd.”

The onee-samas may have called it a photography exhibit, but it was part of the ‘Third-years’ Send-off’ and a group display that we could either choose to participate in, or not. Since our photography club had responded to the request for participation promptly, we’d already been allocated our space.

“If a newbie like me were to display her work, it would sully the good name of the photography club.”

“Oh, but you’ve been paying such close attention to how Tsutako-chan works, haven’t you?”

The five third-years exchanged glances and laughed. I can stand up to them when it’s just one-on-one, but it was more intense encountering all of them in the photography club at once. It felt ominous. Although, having seen the list of photography club members, I knew that not all of them were here yet.

“I don’t pay close attention to her, that’s absurd. I just take care to make sure I’m not getting in her way.”

I backed away, smiling insincerely. It looked like I wouldn’t be able to match wits with them, since they were two years older and almost adult women.

“Well. Okay. But about the exhibition. Even though us third-years are participating, it’s for the ‘Third-years’ Send-off,’ so the feeling of starting a new chapter in your life is important. We want to be in a position to congratulate our adorable Shouko-chan on her memorable display.”

“Haa.”

What she was saying sounded plausible enough, but the onee-samas only thought of me as a new toy.

Tsutako-sama was a year younger than them but still didn't hesitate to call herself the 'Photography Club's Ace.' And since they couldn't find a gap in Tsutako-sama's defenses, they instead took great delight in alternatively teasing and caressing (who they thought was) her henchman, ie. me. You could even say it was a warped form of affection.

Like today, they'd banned the second-years from coming to the clubhouse because they said they were going to be developing some photos, but they sweet-talked me into going with them (by saying, "Tsutako-chan will be there too,") when I was walking down the hallway. But when I entered the club room, far from developing film they were having a candy party. At this point, nothing would shock me.





“It’s not about good or bad, it’s the thought that counts, right?”

Timidly, I sought confirmation.

“That’s true.”

One of the onee-samas grinned, then added:

“But it can’t be bad. Because it’s the thought.”

She had confirmed my crunch-time guarantee, but that’s the sort of thing you’d expect from a wily old third-year student. In the end, no matter how I struggled they were easily able to maneuver me around. It was even their preference that I refer to them as onee-samas.

“Ah, right, right.”

When I was about to leave, one of the onee-samas called out to me.

“Like we were saying, you can’t ask Tsutako-chan for help on this one.”

“Huh?”

I hadn’t even thought about that, but it still upset me that they kept warning me not to get Tsutako-sama to help.

“You’ll be fine. We’ll help you with developing the film. All you have to do is take the photos by yourself, and bring the film here. Of course, those photos have to be ones that prove to us, no, to everyone that sees them, that you took them all by yourself.”

I felt uneasy when they gave me an unused roll of film.

“But how will I ... ”

Be able to prove that I took them all by myself?

“Don’t make that face. You’ll work it out, if you think about it. There’s at least one way of doing it.”

“Huh ... ?”

A biscuit was jammed into my open mouth.

“Ah.”

As I munched on that confectionery shaped like the door on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, I left the clubhouse behind, almost tumbling out the door.

From there I ran to the university store and bought a permanent marker, then returned to the school grounds and entered the toilet block, where I have just opened the box of film that I was given.

The characteristic smell of the permanent marker accompanied its squeaking sound.

The words I wrote on the roll of film (27 shots) after taking it out of the box were ‘Takeshima Tsutako.’

For the next couple of days, I’m going to walk around with this film in my camera.

The significance of the name ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ written on the film is that I intend to fill it with shots of her.

Without Tsutako-sama noticing. Just thinking about it excites me.

At this point, I still don’t know what an ordeal it will become.

I can’t even imagine the sort of fuss that the completed film will cause.

Frame of Mind 10

“This is yours, Shouko-chan.”

Tsutako-san said.

“Yes.”

Shouko-chan nodded.

“Ehhhh – !?”

The massive shock rolled over them like a tsunami. Which would make the preceding declaration of, “I’m sorry!” the earthquake.

But the response of, “Yes,” to the statement, “This is yours, Shouko-chan,” was frankly more astonishing.

“How long have you known?”

Yoshino-san snapped at Tsutako-san. The great detective was clearly not amused at being beaten at her own game.

“I had a hunch fairly early on. Then when I ran into her on the way back from the gymnasium, I thought it might be hers. She looked like she was agonizing over something. I could tell something was up, but I wasn’t sure what.”

“But your hunch came even earlier than that?”

Excluding the part when Tsutako-san went to the gymnasium, Yumi had been with her pretty much the whole time. So this was definitely something she wanted to hear. For reference.

“Earlier, you asked about how Katsura-san knew I was in the Rose Mansion, then we had a discussion about it, yeah? Since it looked like someone told her I was here.”

“Ahh, I remember that.”

“And the most logical explanation was that Shouko-chan told her when they met in the clubhouse.”

“But then we ruled that out because Shouko-chan hadn’t been told about it.”

“That’s right.”

Tsutako-san snapped her fingers.

“Shouko-chan knew, even though she hadn’t been told. So what would lead to that outcome?”

“She has ESP?”

Yumi’s lame response was met with a derisive, “That’s not it,” from Yoshino-san and it was left to Shimako-san to provide an answer.

“I suppose Shouko-chan might have seen it. Tsutako-san going into the Rose Mansion, that is.”

“Correct ... right?”

Tsutako-san looked to Shouko-chan for confirmation.

“Yes.”

But even then, so what?

“It may have just been a coincidence that she saw it, but it may also have been because she was waiting outside our second-year pine group classroom. And why would Shouko-chan be in a place like that?”

“Why indeed?”

The question being posed was why did Shouko-chan wait outside their classroom, not approach Tsutako-san in the hallway, and then

surreptitiously follow them to the Rose Mansion. Yumi had no idea whatsoever.

“My current hypothesis is that she wasn’t so much spying on me as checking to make sure that no-one else approached me.”

Shouko-chan was listening to Tsutako-san’s explanation along with everyone else.

“But, for what possible reason?”

Mami-san asked.

“So no-one could give me that roll of film. After all, it has Takeshima Tsutako written on it. If anyone found it, they’d bring it straight to me. So if she saw anyone strange approaching the classroom, she could step in and offer to return the film to me. Since we’re both in the photography club, no-one would have a problem with that.”

But then Tsutako-san relocated to the Rose Mansion. And Shouko-chan adjusted her tactics. Nobody would think to look for Tsutako-san in the Rose Mansion, so standing guard outside there would be pointless. So it’d be better to stake out the places where people would go to look for Tsutako-san.

“So she went to the clubhouse.”

“Exactly. And that’s when you met Katsura-san, right? You only told her I was in the Rose Mansion after you were satisfied that she didn’t want to see me about the film. But after waiting at the clubhouse for a while you were getting restless, so you started to wander around. The courtyard’s probably where you thought you dropped the film.”

But that was where she met Mami-san, and was taken to the infirmary. What an incredible deduction. Yumi was impressed. It was pretty impressive that Tsutako-san could envisage all this based on those few hints, but what was even more impressive was that it all looked to be more or less correct.

“But then why did she drop it in the first place. If it’s that important, surely she’d take good care of it.”

It certainly seemed incomprehensible. Everyone agreed. Shouko-chan explained.

“I always carry it with me so that I don’t lose it, and so Tsutako-sama doesn’t see it. But today, while cleaning, I tripped over in the courtyard. That’s probably when it fell out of my pocket. It was only after I’d finished washing out the cuts that I noticed it missing. I rushed back to the courtyard, but couldn’t find it.”

That was when Shouko-chan’s suspicious behavior started.

“So?”

“In here are photos of me that were taken in secret.”

Tsutako-san looked grim as she tapped on the top of the film canister.

“I’m sorry.”

Shouko-chan earnestly apologized. But there was no, “That’s okay,” forthcoming.

“I shouldn’t have stopped Yoshino-san.”

So that’s what she was thinking.

“Huh?”

Tsutako-san held the film in her left hand and cried out, “Here I go,” as she made the kind of movement you’d use to unfurl a scroll with her right hand.

“Ahh – !? Don’t do it!”

Yumi covered her eyes with both hands. Film can’t be exposed to the light until after it’s been processed. For someone who knew full well what it would do to expose the film, it was unthinkable.

“... Heh, as if I’d do that.”

When she heard that, Yumi timidly opened her eyes and saw Tsutako-san smiling and rolling the film around on the palm of her hand. Naturally, it was undamaged. The film had not been pulled out of its casing. Apparently she’d just pretended to do that.

Still, as far as jokes go, the performance went a bit too far. Yumi had thought her heart was going to stop.

“I mean, I’m always taking hidden photographs, and I wouldn’t be so self-centered as to say that I’m the only one who doesn’t want to be photographed. Besides, I’m sure I’ve had my photo taken plenty of times without realizing it anyway.”

Bravo, Tsutako-san.

Still, the friends gathered there understood perfectly.

For the past few months, Shouko-chan had been watching Tsutako-san intently. During that time, she had undoubtedly absorbed all kinds of things. The art of photography may come in time, but a small part of her already resembled Tsutako-san.

“It was fun, right?”

Tsutako-san asked, turning towards Shouko-chan. Shouko-chan said, “A little bit,” then stuck out her tongue, smiled and said.

“No, a lot.”

* * *

Incidentally, the ‘Takeshima Tsutako’ film was developed a couple of days later, and it contained photos that were too dark to make out the subject,

out-of-focus shots, ones where some third person's elbow was intruding on a close-up – almost all of the photos were flawed in some way.

However, there was one photo. A wonderful shot, that had everyone buzzing.

It was a profile shot showing Tsutako-san's serious face as she was holding up her camera, preparing to take a photograph.

Afterword

Hello, this is Konno.

This book is a compilation of the ‘Maria-sama ga Miteru’ works published in the Cobalt magazine from 2005 until the middle of the current year (2007). Up to now there have been two such books released, so it might intuitively be called “Variety Gifts’ Sequel’s Sequel,” or “Variety Gifts 3.”

Enumerating the magazine volumes, “The Awkward Princess’ was published in the April 2005 edition and “The Greenhouse Fairy” in August. Moving on to 2006, “Three-Leaf Clover” was in February, “The Yellow Thread” in April, “The Doppelganger Story” in August and “Sprouts in Dry Wood” in December. And “April Deja-Vu” was published in April 2007. Adding the new pieces “Bouton of Light” and “A Roll of Film” brings the number of stories to 9. The requisite story that ties them all together brings the number to 10. Compared to the number of stories in “Variety Gifts” and “In Library,” that’s a lot.

At any rate, this volume’s keyword is “photograph.” The stories relate in various ways, ranging from the central part it plays in “The Doppelganger Story” to the brief mention in “The Yellow Thread.” As for the title, “Frame of Mind,” I wanted to use the word frame because of the photograph connection, and since the other titles were all written in katakana it was settled. Literally, it would be a snapshot of your mind. Of your thoughts and feelings.

Incidentally, in the previous volume, “In Search of You,” Yumi and Touko were getting along nicely, so I apologize to everyone who had expectations for this volume. The events of “Frame of Mind 1-10” all take place on a day between the Valentine’s Day event and the winner’s dates. Chronologically, this all occurs somewhere within “In Search of You.” On top of that, it’s the binding story. There’s no way to fit everything about the soeurs. Well, those kind of drastic changes are fine from time to time, right?

Ah – with those ramblings, it looks like I've used up all the pages allotted to the afterword (I'm running late, so I wonder if I've forgotten something?)

I have a plan for the next short story to publish in the magazine, but as for the next volume's keyword I can't think of it at all ... I guess I'm either taking things too easily or going too fast.

Konno Oyuki.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Suzumoto is written as 鈴本, Suzuki is written as 鈴木. Suzumoto has one additional horizontal stroke in the second character.
2. ↑ <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/T%C5%8Dryanse>
3. ↑ This is a reference to Ryougen, a Tendai monk. Gansan means third day of the year, and Daishi is a name for a spiritual leader.
<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Ry%C5%8Dgen> has a little bit more information about him.
4. ↑ There's a level of uncertainty introduced by using katakana rather than kanji, because multiple kanji can be represented with the same katakana.
5. ↑ In the original, Yumi provides two examples of alternate names that would be read as Takeshima Tsutako: 竹島津田子 and 竹島ツタ子, as well as Tsutako's 武島蔦子
6. ↑ Satsuki's name is written as 皐月 which, as mentioned, means the fifth month.
7. ↑ Translation courtesy of Wikipedia:
<https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/T%C5%8Dryanse> This is the traffic light melody mentioned in 'April Deja-vu.' The Tenjin Shrine from the original has been replaced with Maria-sama.
8. ↑ The Japanese Wikipedia has some pictures of these at <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ja/wiki/%E5%BA%9A%E7%94%B3%E5%A1%94> and the English Wikipedia has some basic information about the beliefs at <https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/K%C5%8Dshin>
9. ↑ In Japanese, stairway (階段) is pronounced the same as ghost story (怪談) and discussion (会談). Minato stops because she realizes the terrible pun Ryouko has made.
10. ↑ https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Hyakumonogatari_Kaidankai